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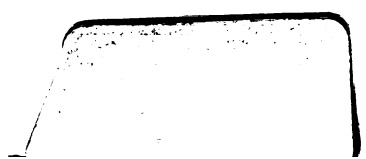
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HESTER KIRTON.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"A BAD BEGINNING," "CHESTERFORD,"

ETC. ETC.

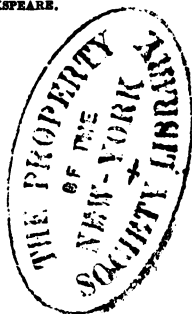
[Mrs. K. S. Macquoid.]

He who the sword of Heaven will bear,
Should be as holy as severe;—
More nor less to others paying,
Than by self-offences weighing.—SHAKESPEARE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

—



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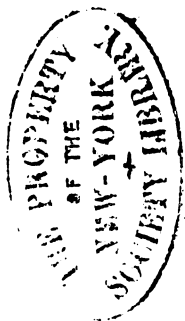
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BOOK THE THIRD.



UPLANDS.





HESTER KIRTON.

CHAPTER I.

FATHER AND CHILD.

It was a bright spring morning, not that early time when we almost wonder how the rash young leaves can venture to cast off their scaly covering, and bare themselves to nipping winds by day and cruel night frosts, but genial warmth, in which even a few early brimstone butterflies disported themselves among the blackberry bushes on each side of the stately old high road. Just at this point, it was picturesque as well as stately. It had been ascending gradually for nearly half-a-mile, and now, the hill having become too steep for it to keep pace with, it took its way, or, rather,

a way had been cut for it, through the top of the hill, so that lofty, almost perpendicular, banks of bright yellow earth rose on each side, crowned with thick pine woods. Except just at that time of year and day, when the sun over-topped the tall trees, the road lay in deep shadow—a quiet valley, up whose sides clambered the aforesaid brambles, tangled with sloe-bushes, on some of which rampant ivy had established round tree-tops, glittering with mingled light and shadow.

Wild flowers were scanty. A few steps farther, after passing the crest of the hill, the road opened suddenly on the left; a tall, white hand-post, standing on a triangular piece of turf, protruded like a tongue from the green wood path, telling travellers, of divers tempting villages behind and before them, while a shorter limb, pointing into the pine wood itself, bore on it the simple inscription, “To Uplands.”

The green path led through the heart of the wood; there were bye-paths in plenty, but they wound and twisted themselves out of sight in too alluring a manner to entice any experienced traveller to pursue their meanderings, lest they



might prove as bewilderingly delightful as Hamadryads; only an ardent lover of flowers could not have resisted straying from the path, now that the pines were replaced by noble English forest trees, occasional glimpses of open space between the spreading roots of beeches, whose leaves had scarcely unfolded their silken verdure, revealing patches of deep green feathered foliage, crowned with the lovely trembling blossoms of wood anemone, or closer nestling almost into its mother earth, the delicate wood sorrel, with its exquisite three-fold leaf and scarlet stem. Violets, too, were abundant in the wood, and bluebells, and primroses, and, in grand masses, sitting queen-like on its handsome, spreading leaves, the snowy-flowered garlic. But, after a while, the brambles grew closer and closer to the path, and the trees met nearer over-head, although, from the lessening of the green gloom in front, it was plain the wood was ending.

At length, the path turned suddenly to the right, and stopped at a white gate, on the other side of which was Uplands itself—a noble park, well planted with stately trees, grouped with no common skill. A winding path led up and

down the many undulations to a point where the trees stood more closely together, and were yet more vividly contrasted in foliage. Spring was still in the glory of its fresh livery: the tender green of the elms and limes looking yet brighter beside the broad leaves of Spanish chestnut and gloomy Italian pines. Through the verdure of these closely-grouped trees, appeared at intervals the Tudor gables and twisted chimneys of the house itself. Leaving the path, and walking close up to the trees on the left, might be seen, through the spaces between their trunks, the comparatively modern frontage of a comfortable family mansion; a broad-grassed ditch surmounted by an iron chevaux-de-frise divided the lawn from the park. Such a lawn! not cut up into fancifully-devised flower-beds, but a broad, smooth expanse of turf, the monotony relieved by huge baskets here and there formed of the subverted roots and part of the trunks of what must have been majestic beech trees, their twisted, picturesque wreathing filled with scarlet and white and golden tulips, making quite an eastern blaze of colour. Returning to the guidance of the foot-path, it led through a large, swinging gate,

parallel with the right-hand angle of the house to the entrance-gate—fronted by a broad, grassy level, sloping down from which, and extending a considerable distance to the park gates, was a noble avenue of Spanish chestnut trees—the principal entrance to Uplands.

The house was far more picturesque on this side, evidently built in the early days of James I., with irregular gables, projecting oriels, and quaint chimney stacks. There was a charming old-fashioned English garden here, separated by a low red brick wall from the broad ditch into which the grassy trench changed as soon as it had reached the entrance-gate—probably the remains of the moat of former times—for Uplands boasted a more remote antiquity than any brick and mortar evidence about it would have substantiated. Beyond this side of the house, but adjoining it, were the out-buildings and stable-yard; a high irregular pile, evidently the most ancient part of the building, surmounted by a clock-turret, the grotesque old face of which was rendered almost indistinct by a quaint Latin inscription.

The stable-yard, seen through the open-arched entrance, lay in deep shadow, throwing by its

relief, a still more vivid brightness on the low wall, which turning at right angles at the entrance, made a parapet to the bridge over the ditch. The wall had been, and was still in some places, red brick, but patches of grey lichen had crept over it, which the sun's intense heat had changed into gold and brown. Here and there were tufts of dark green moss in full blossom; wall-flowers nodded on the top, or peeped out among the crannies, while an overgrowth of snap-dragon not yet in flower, and trailing dog-rose and bramble, gave token what a study of colour the old wall would be, when the year had grown a little older.

Turning from the sun-blaze of colour, to refresh the eyes in the cool arched shadow, there stood in it now, a picture literally framed in by the rugged brickwork in front, to which the quaint stable buildings formed a fitting background. A gentleman, holding a little child by the hand—the gentleman was singularly handsome, but the intense, all-engrossing devotion, with which he was bending over the child, arrested the eye more than his own striking appearance. The little boy, who seemed to be between two and three years old, was evidently trying to explain

something about the great blood-hound standing beside him. His fearless attitude, one delicate hand laid firmly on the creature's head, while, pointing eagerly with the other, he was asking some questions about his favourite, was almost startling; in size he looked a mere baby; his limbs, though small, were rounded, but he was one of those rare children, whose face makes all else forgotten; an exquisitely fair and transparent skin; light sunny auburn hair curled close to his head; but for the hue, more like rings of silkworm's silk than aught else. A faint tinge of colour in each cheek would have made you exclaim—even when little Ralph was drooping his eyelids, as he often did—"What a lovely child!" but when he raised those long black lashes, it was scarcely possible to believe that the large lustrous dark eyes, in whose liquid depths there seemed to be already thought as well as intelligence, could belong to a child not yet three years old. The beauty of both the parents was wonderfully blended in the child.

Frederic Hallam—for although nearly three years older than when we last saw him—he was not too much changed for instant recognition, had

thrown himself down on the grass as soon as they had passed the bridge, and drawn little Ralph into his lap.

“And so you think, my boy, poor Bevis has been crying.”

The child looked up at him quickly, and then nodded his head gravely, to show that his father had at last caught his meaning. He lay still a minute or two, while Hallam looked earnestly at him, and then struggled himself free.

And finding he was free, he ran away, calling “Beewee,” as he named the dog, to follow him; then suddenly spying a butterfly—probably the first in his young experience—he was off in pursuit of “the dear little bird,” as he called it.

His peals of soft laughter, and shrieks of delight, were almost wild in their exuberance. At times he seemed, to his father, more like a fairy child than a reality. There was something unfathomable in the depth of those exquisite dark eyes.

They were like Hester’s, and unlike them; larger and more expressive—at least the expression was less self-contained. As that child grew to manhood, the wonderful depth in his eyes might indicate a somewhat reserved character, but not a

distrustful one ; rather a mind that would withhold its treasures from casual observation, to pour them forth eagerly at the prompting of a kindred spirit.

His father lay on the ground watching him, as he ran eagerly in pursuit of the butterfly, tossing his straw hat in the air, and shrieking out unintelligible words, in the excess of his excitement and delight. Hallam sighed as he thought of his extreme delicacy, and the difficulty there had hitherto been in rearing the fragile, beautiful child ; and tears sprang to his eyes as he felt, with an agony no one who is not a parent can understand, how hard it would be to yield up this treasure again. \ Perhaps there is no doctrine so difficult in practice, so easy in theory, as that our children are only lent us, not really our own. / And then he thought how different his existence would be without Ralphie, and he wondered whether the new-found inner-life that his child's hand had mysteriously guided him into, would be a mere baffling labyrinth without him, whether he should return for refuge from the disappointment that he knew would then make itself more deeply felt, to the world and its dangerous pleasures. :

Till the child had stolen into his heart so deeply

as to make its welfare the beginning and end of each day's thought and action, Frederic Hallam had often said he had no heart at all; he had never felt the power of Love, and, therefore, did not believe in it. After the memorable interview with his wife on his return from Tatton, he had accepted tacitly, and for ever, that there was no hope of mutual affection in his married life. What passed in that interview was never disclosed in words, but the results spoke for themselves. Frederic Hallam's debts were paid entirely; for the first time since he went up to Oxford, he was a free man; his means of living were also evidently enlarged; but, as has been said, to the surprise of most of his friends, before that London season was over—in fact, within a week from his return from Tatton,—they learned that the Hallams had left town suddenly for some country place, which they intended to rent for three years. "If, at the expiration of that time, we find a country life suits us," Hallam wrote to Captain Fortescue, "we shall purchase either Uplands itself, if the owner will part from it, or some other place in the country."

From impulse, probably, rather than from any

reasoning process, although he had declared such things would be distasteful to him, Hallam had at once thrown himself, with his usual vitality, into agricultural studies and country pursuits, and although, at first, he found the business of entertaining country neighbours, and returning their visits, a very wearisome routine after the sparkle and variety of a London life, he had a keen sense of natural beauties, and soon became enthusiastic in his admiration of the lovely scenery in the neighbourhood of Uplands.

He had always been a sportsman, and now he took to hunting with a zest that surprised some of the old members of the hunt, who looked upon him as a mere Londoner. His garden, too, was a fertile source of enjoyment, and his gardener found that his master was soon as well-informed on the subject of new and rare plants as himself.

He seldom went to London, but when he did so he was sure to visit the flower-shows, and order fresh stores of rarities for his conservatory. But he could not bear to leave Ralphie now that each day made the child dearer and more interesting, and as Hester resolutely opposed taking him to

London, on account of the fatigue of so long a journey, his father had not left home for several months.

In less than a year, the term for which they held Uplands would have expired, and then where would they go? Whenever he asked his wife's opinion on the subject, she always declined giving it, till nearer the period of their departure, saying it would be mere waste of words, as no one could possibly tell what might occur in the interim.

Hallam's own wish was to purchase the property; they had ascertained that the owner was quite willing to sell it, being wedded to a roving life; but he knew that if he expressed this desire, it would be sufficient to provoke his wife's contradiction; he had learned by experience that there was no peace in opposition to her now imperious will, and peace was very dear to Frederic Hallam, even if he could not have love with it.

Disappointment had not soured him, gradually his whole tone of mind had changed; at first the constant estrangement between himself and Hester had been an annoyance; his pride had revolted from the position in which he was placed; but although she retained the control of her property

when she came of age, she prevailed on Goldsmith to settle such an income on her husband as should make him independent of her, so long as he lived as he did at present. Her wonderful talents, which seemed to him to have developed suddenly, had much impressed him, and this generosity touched him. He scarcely knew how deeply interested he had become in watching the growth of his wife's character, or how steadily and certainly he was learning to love her.

Yes, to love her, spite of her unvarying coldness and hardness towards himself; and as yet he scarcely knew how much of his passionate love for little Ralphie was due to the child's resemblance to his mother.

CHAPTER II.

RETROSPECT.

“WHEN are you going to invite ‘my mother, Hester? I thought I heard you talking about it.”

Mrs. Hallam looked up from the blue and yellow review, which she had been reading for the last hour, apparently quite unconscious that her husband had entered the room and seated himself on a sofa near her.

“Yes; but I did not know there was any especial reason for hurry,” she said, quietly.

How beautiful she had grown; the advantages of perfect dress, and the polish of good society, had given her all she wanted externally, and a journey to the continent, the previous autumn, had added that indescribable something which few women possess, who have not mixed with foreigners. It had been especially beneficial to Hester; her

manner was slightly grave, and although, of course, that is a safer error than mere chattering frivolity, I imagine that smiles may preach as salutary doctrine as frowns or stiffness ; at any rate, if frivolity be carried so far as to repel, it is from want of heart or feeling beneath ; but a hard unbending manner may, and often does, cover a wealth of mind and sentiment which would benefit the very people alienated by so disagreeable a rind.

This foreign journey had been taken with some neighbours, a family named Crathie, who were enthusiastic admirers of their beautiful friend. Mr. Hallam had been asked to join the party, but he said it was quite impossible they could both leave little Ralphie, who was constantly ailing through the autumn and winter months. For once departing from the rule he had made—ever since his wife had told him in the memorable interview before they began a country life, that she must henceforth despise him—never, if possible, to thwart her inclinations, so that there might be no open cause of quarrel between them, he opposed this journey, and promised if she would only wait another year, when Ralphie might travel, that he would take her wherever she wished to go. It

was impossible they could both go, and he thought her place was with her child.

Hester listened calmly till he had ended. She told him he had spoken too late; she had made all her preparations, and could not disappoint her friends, and then left the room, evidently to avoid further discussion.

Probably, if he had not already begun to love her, and to fancy that at times he saw a change in her manner towards himself, he would have persisted in withholding his consent, and have brought matters to a crisis; but he longed so much for her affection, that he would not run any further risk of alienating it. Perhaps the temporary absence might bring back some of her old feelings towards him.

It often happens that the praises of others first awaken us to the full perception of the merits of those we live with; at least, there are some people who do not venture on a decided opinion, till number has given value to it. Frederic Hallam was not so weak as this, but probably the universal admiration his wife excited, both in the country and in London—for they had passed one season in town since Ralphie's birth—had

weight with him ; certainly, if he thought the change in her wonderful before, he was astonished when she returned from Paris.

She had been away for several months, and the improvement both in her manner and looks was striking, but it mortified and pained him deeply to find her as cold, as indifferent to him as ever. It was evident that the pains and care she had lavished on self-culture had not been taken for him. Is it to be wondered at, if he worshipped her spite of her treatment of him, that she was popular everywhere, and although considered sarcastic and eccentric by women, was idolized by men, on whom, however, her lofty bearing and a manner totally free from coquetry, imposed due restraint ; it was as if she would have said or rather made her husband feel,—

“See what a treasure might have been your own.”

More than once since he had begun to think more deeply, he had tried to show Hester, that, however independent she might be in worldly matters, still that no wife can ever be independent of her husband, or emancipated from his control, so long as they two remain one ; but the writhing scorn with which she had answered, silenced him ;

he knew her superior powers of reasoning would be sure to triumph, and while she would maintain her calm self-possession, her sarcasm would rouse his pride to say far more than he intended. If she were only a passionate woman, he thought things might have been different; he would have braved reproaches, even a storm, sure, with the tears that followed, to find some softening towards him, but it seemed hopeless now; the real cause of his reluctance to press matters more closely, or seek a reconciliation, was that he feared to know the certainty of what he dreaded, that she was utterly indifferent to his love; and as he became more and more conscious of the falsehood of his marriage, so she seemed to him more justified in resenting it.

It was fortunate that his nature was sanguine and joyous, or he must have become soured by such continued restraint and absence of sympathy.

He was anxious to see his mother, she had not stayed at Uplands since Hester's return, and he wanted her to see the change in his wife; even she, he thought, would admit that she had become very distinguished-looking.

In answer to Hester's remark, he said,—

“She told me, in her last letter, that she was

not well, and should be glad to get away from London, just at this gay time, for a while. If we don't ask her, she will go somewhere else."

"That would be absurd," said Hester, who liked her mother-in-law far better than in former days; the elder Mrs. Hallam's reverence for riches having overcome her repugnance to Hester's want of connections, she had treated her with more consideration. "I shall write and tell her she must come to us at once; she ought to have been asked sooner, I wonder you had not thought of it."

"I have written to her this morning, so you can enclose it, if you like," he said; "or, stay, I shall not send my letter now, as I shall see her so soon."

He had really written to invite his mother to fix the time of her visit, in case he should find Hester unwilling to do so; but he thought it would make matters go smoother with Mrs. Hallam, if he allowed Hester the full credit of the invitation.

"I shall leave her to name her own time," said Hester, "so, perhaps, it may not be just yet."

"But I must go up to town next week," said her husband, "and I thought I would persuade

her to return with me; she likes an escort, you know. Hester, will you go with me?" he added, after a moment's pause.

"Oh, no, thank you; you know our arrangements never suit—I care nothing about these flower-shows you are so fond of—perhaps I may return to town with your mother, but I have not thought about it yet. I am going to drive now, and I shall take Ralphie, unless you want him."

"No, oh, no; the drive will do him good," said Hallam; and moving with a graceful stateliness, his wife left him alone to think.

And he was full of bitter thoughts against her, for she had just inflicted a keen disappointment. He had been thinking lately that if they went alone together to London for a little while, with not even Ralphie to come between them, the reconciliation he longed for might be effected; he should see more of Hester than he could at home, where her days seemed purposely planned out so as to separate her pursuits from his, and he should be able to assure himself, whether any remains of her former love lingered beneath her habitually cold manner. Her last words were almost sufficient to prove that there was no hope

of this. Surely if a wife loved her husband at all, she could not help showing some sympathy in his pursuits; it would be so easy for her to take a little interest in his flowers; but he did not understand how trifling all this seemed to Hester.

So long as her rooms were well furnished and arranged with due formality, she was satisfied. She cared not for, perhaps despised, the elegant superfluities, if you will, that betoken woman's presence in a dwelling. Some of the most endearing links in love's chain are not necessarily useful. Hester was very *real* in everything; but there may be too great a preponderance of one good quality.

He mused with a heavy heart on all this, and he thought it might have been better if he had said at once to Hester, that he wished her to accompany him to London; but then, if she had decidedly refused, he could not have borne it; he should have reminded her of her duty, and they should have quarrelled; anything better than that. A secret feeling told him that matters could not long continue as they were at present, that his feelings would burst from the control under which he held them, and then what would

ensue? He could not bear to think of it, for if he found it impossible to effect a reconciliation with Hester, they must part; they could not live the past year over again.

“But where is the use of dwelling on the black side of things?” he said to himself, cheerfully. “Every one must have some trial or trouble. I wonder if other married couples are often circumstanced as we are, or if ours is a rare case.”

And then he went on thinking over the married people he knew, and their apparent happiness; and one remarkable difference struck him between Hester and other wives; they were usually surrounded by affectionate relations; the husbands seemed quite as much to belong to their wives’ families as to their own; in fact, he knew it was the received creed, that a wife never amalgamates with her husband’s people, as he does with hers; and he wondered it had not occurred to him before, that in alienating Hester from her own relations, he had checked and narrowed her sympathies. The colour rose to his forehead; he remembered his wish to separate her from the Wrenshaws, till she came of age, lest their influence might be adverse to his own, in the

management of her property—truly a fruitless precaution.

Mrs. Bonham had written to congratulate Hester on Ralphie's birth, and had told her that she was also a mother ; but he recollected that his wife had seemed annoyed, and had thrown the letter contemptuously aside ; he believed she had not answered it, and he remembered, with regret, how he had first put a stumbling block in the way of her relations with Lucy.

Her uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. Wrenshaw, had lived abroad ever since he and his wife had come to Uplands, so that he could not feel they had been neglected ; but as he thought of Lucy's bright affectionate face, and the warmth of some of her former letters to Hester, he wished he had not been so hasty, and that that invitation to Stedding had been accepted, the refusal of which had apparently caused the estrangement between the cousins.

CHAPTER III.

THE POET.

JACOB and Lucy had been more fortunate than their wealthy cousins. They were just as much in love with each other as when we first knew them, and they had three rosy, healthy darlings, instead of poor little solitary Ralphie.

But they were all girls, and this was a great disappointment, not so much to Jacob or Lucy as to Mrs. Frank Wrenshaw. She did think Lucy might have done better than she had ; in her own case, to be sure, there was some excuse, seeing her poor dear Frank had died, out of what Mrs. Wrenshaw called, "the necessary course of things ;" but to have three children, one after another, and not a boy among them to be brought up to his father's profession, was vexing indeed. Except for this one complaint, Mrs. Frank was a

most exemplary grandmother, spoiling and over-feeding the children to her heart's content, and never allowing any one to find fault with them, but herself.

"I tell you what, Jacob," said Lucy to her husband, "between you and mamma those children will be ruined."

Jacob, who was occupied in feeding his second daughter—aged one year and a half—with strawberries, affected deafness to this appeal.

Lucy, junior, a demure-faced maiden of three years, with round blue eyes and fair shining curls, the eyes being almost overwhelmed by the superabundant cheeks, which made a pouting rose-bud of her pretty mouth, lifted her eyes from her plate, and looked gravely at her mother.

"What is ruined?" she said.

And the next little one, with its mouth full of strawberries, echoed the question, of course, with an importance that made both Lucy and Jacob laugh.

"It shan't be ruined, at any rate," said Lucy, pressing her youngest—a baby of a few months only—closer to her; for, on Sunday afternoon, the little ones had dessert with papa, and baby came in and played the part of an excited spectator.

"Grandmamma will be here directly," said Jacob, looking at his watch; "now, little Lucy, put grandma's chair all ready."

The small Lucy gave a reluctant look at her strawberries, but still she bustled out of her high chair, holding cautiously by the edge of the table.

The chair was placed there ready, but Jacob seemed to think that the little creature ought to be encouraged in the notion that it was all her doing, because she drew it one inch nearer the table.

"That will do, darling," said her mother; "good little girl—kiss mamma."

Lucy held up her wee mouth, repeating gravely, "Dood ittle dirl—isn't me clever?"

In which idea both the proud parents were, of course, delighted to coincide.

"There's granama—now run and open the parlour door, Lucy."

And in came Mrs. Frank Wrenshaw, looking as young and bright as ever; almost as young as her daughter, for matrimony and its attendant cares, had not benefited Lucy's health—spite of her happiness.

There was the same bright look, but her cheeks

had lost their bloom, and her shoulders somewhat of their roundness; her hands were no longer the white dimpled playthings they had been when Jacob married her; but then Lucy had been no make-believe mother. Her whole character had greatly changed since we last saw her, and the change was in nothing more perceptible than in her manner to her mother. There is nothing that seems to make a parent's love truly appreciated, till we have children of our own; then, how each loving care we render, how each heart-throb of affection teaches what has been felt for us. Happy, if the knowledge come before it is too late to try and atone for the stings and wounds, which even if we have been, in the world's eye, good children, our waywardness, our caprice, and, above all, our impertinent words, must have inflicted.

Till the birth of her first baby, Lucy had scarcely realised how great her mother's tenderness was. Mrs. Frank shone in a sick room: she was not absurd there; she obeyed the doctor's instructions to the letter, with a gentleness and an absence of fuss and worry, greatly conducive to the progress of her patient, and by her self-

control—for it is self-control for a talkative woman not to chatter—and ready thoughtfulness, she rose higher in her son-in-law's good opinion than he had ever thought possible. He began to understand now where some of his darling wife's virtues came from. She was very superior to her mother, because she was never silly, but still he was now so fond of Mrs. Wrenshaw that he could generally tolerate her silliness; she has no husband to keep her in order, thought Jacob, and she has those Miss Skippers to fill her head with their nonsense.

And now, as she came in for her regular Sunday visit after afternoon church, he was as much pleased to see her as the children were, although it was hard work to get her to take any notice of any one except the baby. How perversely mothers and grandmothers always cling to the youngest, as if they thought every one but themselves wished to ill-treat and neglect those soft, rose-dimpled morsels of humanity; but little Lucy and Alice had no intention of being neglected, and "granama," as they called her, was obliged to turn round and listen to them in order to free her silk gown from their strawberry-stained fingers.

"Bless you, my poppet," she said, stooping to kiss Lucy, while she lifted Alice on to her lap.

"Alice wants strawberries, doesn't she a darling?"

"Des," nodded Alice, repeating the words after her own fashion, which her grandmother pronounced to be as plain as plain could be, and then proceeded to dive into her pocket for the weekly packet of sugar-plums.

Lucy meekly protested that Jacob had already given them too much fruit, and that the sugar-plums had better be put away.

"Too bad of him, it is," said Mrs. Wrenshaw, looking sily at her son-in-law, "but I don't see the fairness of punishing the children for his naughtiness, so they shall just scramble for the sweeties while Matty clears away."

"Come into the garden, grandmamma, and I will gather you some roses," said Jacob; "they are coming into bloom fast in this warm sunshine."

• "You come too, Lucy," said her mother, "I've something to tell you while the chicks are busy with their sugar-plums. Now, what do you think Jemima told me this very afternoon?"

"I don't know," said Lucy, feeling utterly at a loss to keep pace with Miss Skipper's stores of information.

"Well, now, you must try and guess; something about some one you used to care for very much, Lucy."

"Not Hester, mother!"

"Well, it's next to being about Hester, because it's one of the family, who'll, of course, know all her goings on. Well, Jemima says that Miss Hallam is coming to stay with the Ainsworths, and, of course, it will be proper for you to call, being a connection."

"I don't know that," said Jacob. "Of course, Lucy can call on Mrs. Ainsworth, as she often does, but I should much rather she did not make her call to Miss Hallam."

"Perhaps it may be no relation," said Lucy, feeling a strange longing to hear something about the friend who seemed so estranged from her. "Hallam is not a common name, but still it belongs to more than one family."

"No, my dear, I assure you, I said exactly the same to Jemima, and she persisted that Dorothy Ainsworth had told her that the Miss

Hallam who is coming to stay with them is own aunt to the Mr. Hallam who married our Hester."

"But," said Lucy, looking earnestly at her husband, "you do not object, do you, Jacob, to my calling while Miss Hallam is in Stedding? I do so long," she continued, and the tears glistened in her eyes, "to hear something about poor dear Hester. I always believe the letter I wrote to her was lost."

"Here are the roses," said her husband, stopping before a tree laden with crimson clusters, "and here is one for you, Lucy. Give me baby, I want to see if she has grown any heavier; you can send Susan for her when you go in."

Lucy knew from his manner that her husband did not wish any more said about Hester, and she went in-doors to make tea, wondering that so forgiving a temper as Jacob's could nourish so deep a grudge.

But it was not so: he avoided any allusion to the Hallams, because of the dislike he had at one time felt to the prospect of an intimacy between his wife and Hester; he had often congratulated himself on keeping the secret of Peter Stasson's

news about Kirton's Farm; for he felt sure that, if he had told it, Lucy would at once have written to express her delight, and, after all, would have been disappointed. How we all grope in the dark! Who can say that Lucy's silence was not the chief cause of Hester's dislike to revisit Kirton's Farm, and who shall say if she had revisited it, how beneficial would have been the influence of her cousin's bright, loving, hopeful nature. It was, at first, Lucy's one great trial, that her husband could not be brought to a favourable opinion of Hester, and as a man's likings and dislikings where the wife is impressionable, generally prevail, she had gone so far as to acknowledge to herself that perhaps she should not think as highly of her cousin now, as in former times; but still she must always love her.

The party was soon assembled round the tea-table. Lucy's drawing-room was the pride of her heart, and the children were never allowed to drink tea there; therefore they were again in what even Lucy now called the parlour. It was wonderful how one by one she had yielded all her little nonsensical ways; with the exception of the dreamy fits which she could not quite conquer, she

had become what Miss Jemima Skipper called "a plain-spoken sensible young woman."

"Alice is not high enough," said Mrs. Wrenshaw, "are you, precious one?"

To which small Lucy of course replied,—

"'Tittle Alice not high 'nuff pecious."

Her grandmother was searching among some music books and folios, on an old-fashioned what-not, and presently drew out a book, which she thought would just do to raise Alice.

In trying to arrange it under the child, without removing her, Alice slipped from her chair, and, as her grandmother tried to prevent her from falling, the folio slid from her hands.

"Gracious me," exclaimed Mrs. Wrenshaw, "why, the book's bewitched; it wants sewing up, Lucy."

Lucy looked, and gave way to an uncontrollable fit of laughter; but Jacob's dismayed face soon restored her composure. All around her and her mother lay strewn sheets of manuscript covered with Jacob's handwriting. She tried to collect them as quickly as possible, but not before her mother's sharp eyes had seen that verses were written upon them.

She picked one up.

"Why, it's poetry, in your writing, Jacob. Well, I never!" she exclaimed, fixing her eyes on the doctor, who looked a picture of guilty confusion; "to think of a father of three children making such a Tom Noddy of himself!—*Sir Erardos, a Romaunt in ten Cantos*,—romaunt, indeed, another way of spelling rubbish. Jacob, Jacob, so sure as men or women take to scribbling, so sure they come to ruin. Why, there'll be Lucy taking to it next, and letting the baby tumble in the fire, or giving it the ink bottle to play with. Oh, Jacob! why, do you know, I caught Lucy writing a drama, I think she called it, when she was twelve years old; so I just put it all in the fire, and declared I'd tell every one if she ever tried again. I knew fast enough she'd never grow up respectable if she took to that sort of trash."

"But," said Jacob, recovering himself, and speaking rather stiffly, "I really think we may all employ our leisure as we like, and, besides, I meant to—to sell that poem when it is finished."

"Now don't, Jacob, or I shall never leave off laughing at you; sell your pills, not your poetry,

sell! fiddle-faddle; you'll sell that 'romaunt'—what on earth such a word means, I'm sure I can't tell—to the buttermilk, I expect, for waste paper, only don't sell it in Stedding; once it got known you'd been such a goose, why you'd lose all your practice at once. I wonder what Jemima Skipper'd say; surely, Lucy, you don't hold with such tantrums—a doctor writing rhymes!”

“Well, mother, I agree with Jacob, that he has a right to employ his leisure as he likes best.”

“And I say,” said Mrs. Wrenshaw, warming in defence of her own opinions, “that his leisure might be better employed in amusing you and reading to you when he comes home than in writing twaddle about knights and cantos.”

“But, mother,” said Lucy, laughing, “suppose nothing amuses me so much as to watch him write, and hear him read it aloud to me afterwards—and I help, too, sometimes; don't I, Jacob?”

“I believe she could write better than I can, if she chose.” Jacob had recovered his good temper, although he had felt the attack on his poetry more than he would one on his professional skill. “But I quite agree with you, that the subject had

better not be mentioned to the Miss Skippers, or any more at all. I know it would be considered unprofessional, and therefore I never mention it."

"Well, all I can say is," said his mother-in-law, feeling exceedingly aggrieved at what she considered obstinacy, "that one business is enough at a time for any man. You'll write poetry instead of a prescription, some fine day, Jacob, and then you'll wish you'd listened to me. I only know if I'd had the least idea of what was in that book, when Lucy was up-stairs last time, I'd have been tempted to burn every bit of the senseless scribble. Good night, my darlings," she said to the children, who were being taken away to bed; "poor little dears, I hope you'll not come to harm from it."

"I beg your pardon, Jacob, if I was rude about that poetry, but it did put me out," she said, as later in the evening he came to the door to let her out, when she had said good-by'e to all. "You know I love you very much, but you know what I always think of you; there never was a man who worked so hard when he was at play, or played so hard when he ought to have been at work."

CHAPTER IV.

AN INSINUATION.

“WHY, Hallam, you are the last man I expected to see in town; I fancied you had turned hermit;” and Captain Fortescue took his friend’s arm, with the warm pleasure we feel when we meet an old friend after a long separation.

“I have only just arrived from Uplands,” said Hallam, equally pleased to see his friend; “we missed you the year before last, when we spent a few weeks in town—you were in Ireland with your regiment, I think?”

The friends were not good correspondents—their letters had been few and far between; and if Hester’s name were mentioned at all, it was in so casual a manner, that Fortescue could not have judged whether Hallam’s feelings remained unchanged.

The subject was painful—new interests had

come between him and his dream of friendship for his friend's wife, and without having forgotten him, Hallam's face seemed more like a memory than a present fact. Fred made him dine with him, and before they parted that night, Fortescue confessed to himself, that he liked his old friend better than ever; only he thought his spirits less equal than they formerly were.

He was puzzled at this, for, from the terms in which he spoke of his child, he thought he must be happy in his home life. Some great change had taken place in him—he had kept to the intention he had announced, had forsworn betting, and seemed to have become a steady family man. Fortescue attributed the marvel to Hester's influence. It was strange that her husband should scarcely mention her.

"And which of you is this wonderful paragon like?" said Fortescue, laughing; when, for about the twelfth time, Hallam had launched forth in praise of little Ralphie.

"Well, I suppose you don't find it very amusing. You see I've become an ordinary father, after all; but if you only saw him—who is he like? I scarcely know who his eyes are like—the rest of

him is every inch his mother ; but his eyes—sometimes, Fortescue, I think he can't live, they are so wonderful."

Fortescue laughed again.

"I can't help it, Fred, it is so amusing to listen, and to think it is you, Hallam—you, who used to have such a horror of even visiting where there were any children."

"It is the same in this as in most other things ; make a thing your own, and then see how it rises in value."

Fortescue thought he had heard that saying applied to everything but a wife, where perhaps the motto—

'Tis expectation makes a blessing dear,

may be more apposite ; but although Hallam did not mention his wife, his conversation was so much less selfish and worldly, than in former times, that his friend felt a respect for him, which had, perhaps, never mingled with his previous affection. It was pleasant to hear from his own lips, that he was quite free of Goldsmith, in fact had no debts at all.

They met again the following morning, and

Hallam pressed his friend to come down and get some shooting in the autumn. Fortescue hesitated—he had an undefinable reluctance to see Hester again—at any rate he should like to be quite sure how matters stood between husband and wife, before he became their guest. He felt almost convinced that the change in Fred was to be attributed to the happy quiet life he led; and that the excitement and bustle of London depressed him, as excitement often does, when we are unused to it. Still he felt too anxious that it might be so, to refrain altogether from the subject, spite of their last conversation under the trees in Piccadilly. He had been speaking of the Hallams to another friend that morning, who had met Hester in Brussels, and had been charmed with her beauty and her style.

“I suppose it is not the fashion for husbands to rave about their wives as they do about their children,” he said; “but I heard a most enthusiastic description of Mrs. Hallam just now.”

“You had better come down and judge for yourself,” said his friend, but his smile seemed forced. “I do not think you will say she could easily be overrated.”

He turned the conversation easily and rapidly to other things, and seemed so much gayer than on the previous evening, that Fortescue felt more puzzled than ever. Surely, in the renewed confidence that had sprung up between them, deeper far, and more earnest than it had ever been before, if Fred's love for his wife were what so many little hints and casual allusions had made him imagine it to be, why should he speak in such a cold, guarded manner? It was so unlike his open-hearted frankness about other things, and he might have seen that Fortescue had made an effort to broach the subject, and therefore, one would have thought, would have tried not to evade it.

He was leaving town for a few days. Hallam said he should be at Uplands before his friend's return, but he tried hard to make him fix a time for his visit.

"It will, perhaps, be your last chance of seeing the place, and the country round is worth looking at; we can stay on till November, I think, though our term expires in June; but we don't want to go away just when the garden is at its best."

"I wonder you go away at all; why don't you buy it?"

“ There has been some talk about it, but the owner asks rather a long price. I should like nothing better than to end my days at Uplands.”

The friends parted; Fortescue wondering at this new trait in Hallam's character; formerly change was essential to his restless, roving nature. He must be happy, thoroughly and entirely so; nothing else could make a man contentedly forego London and all its endless variety; but then Captain Fortescue was essentially a Londoner; and as, when we look at the outside of a painted window, we only see an intricate, undefined-like mass, so is it impossible for those whose tastes and sympathies differ, to form any correct judgment of the happiness and enjoyment of each other.

Neither Captain Fortescue nor Hester had the same capacity for enjoyment as Hallam: I believe this to be a gift more than an acquisition; there are people whose perceptions of the beautiful, both in nature and art, are almost painfully intense, and these, generally speaking, extract the keenest enjoyment from human pleasures—I do not say worldly pleasures—such people will enjoy a day in the country, a chat with an old

friend, as ardently, even more so, than the most elaborately devised amusement; they are born with the faculty of keen enjoyment, and they usually manage to eschew disagreeables.

Frederic Hallam was essentially happy-natured, and as he now walked towards Wilton Place, all his anxiety about Hester seemed lightened, in the contemplated pleasure of showing little Ralphie to his mother, and witnessing her delight at the improvement in his health.

Meanwhile, Captain Fortescue was on his way to Goldsmith. His brother Gerald had become so involved in betting transactions, that he had been obliged to leave London rather suddenly, and Lady Helena had accompanied him. Several of his numerous engagements with Mr. Goldsmith remained unsettled; and Fortescue, who, from some deeply-founded, although unproven reason, greatly distrusted the lawyer, had undertaken to arrange for his brother.

Mr. Goldsmith received him with his usual suave courtesy, but he buried his face so continually in his pocket-handkerchief, was so deprecatory with his hands, and seemed so involuntarily restless, that his visitor doubted him more than ever.

He was very hard to deal with, would not even grant the time he had often allowed to Fortescue, and refused entirely to renew for the largest amount.

"I scarcely expected this of you, Goldsmith ; in my time, you must have made quite profit enough out of me, to enable you (I don't say to induce, for I know, with you rich men, the more you get the more you desire) to grant my brother more liberal terms."

"My dear sir," said Goldsmith, eyeing him with his head slightly bent on one side, "you must be joking this morning. If all gentlemen were as careful and prudent as yourself, society would go on in a far calmer and more equable manner. You never lived far beyond your means, as a rule; it was only for the exceptions you visited me, I think—only the exceptions."

He laughed so heartily at this idea, that the tears must have come, for he wiped his eyes with his pocket-handkerchief.

Then, seeing Fortescue look impatient, he went on,—

"Forgive me ; but I esteem myself obliged to you, my dear sir, for your introductions ; many of

my best clients have come to me entirely through your recommendation."

Fortescue winced—in other words, he had helped Goldsmith to ruin many of his clients; if this were true, it would have been a satisfaction to have shaken him.

"I believe you give me more credit than I deserve," said he, scornfully; "except my friend Mr. Hallam, I have no remembrance of sending any one to you."

"Well, but it comes to the same thing, Captain Fortescue," said the lawyer, smiling; he perfectly understood and enjoyed his annoyance. "You brought Mr. Hallam, and he sent others—you see my debt remains the same. Have you ever been to Uplands?"

"No, I have not," said Fortescue; some irresistible impulse made him determine to conceal the fact of his friend's presence in London—perhaps a lurking dread of Goldsmith's baneful influence, for he well knew how, at the outset, the lawyer had encouraged Fred's betting propensities.

"A fine place—a very fine place, indeed."

"I wonder they do not buy it?"

Goldsmith raised both hands.

"Couldn't, couldn't, possibly, my dear sir. Why, in the first place, your friend was so over head and ears in debt, that Mrs. Hallam's fortune will take some time to recover the hole made in it, and in the next I think the money's far safer where it is."

Fortescue was strongly tempted to ask where that was; but a slight flush on the lawyer's cheek warned him that he was personally interested in the matter; if he betrayed any suspicion he would be on his guard again.

"Ah! I was away at the time Mrs. Hallam came of age. I never heard how that business was settled."

Goldsmith looked at him searchingly, but he appeared so calm and indifferent, that he believed he was merely asking to satisfy his curiosity.

"I thought every one had heard the story," he said; "your friend hoped to have it all his own way, but he was mistaken. Mrs. Frederic Hallam is a noble-spirited woman, with far too much respect for her father's memory to yield up his property to be made ducks and drakes of."

It was so utterly unlike the usual mystery of the man to speak thus openly of his client's

affairs, that each moment Fortescue's suspicion of him increased; but he only looked inquiringly.

"I am sorry to say it, because he is your friend, Captain Fortescue; but I greatly fear"—he buried his face for a moment—"that my poor friend's child was most unfortunate in her choice of a husband. I have reason to believe"—he looked hard at his visitor—"that he married her entirely for her money. She has done marvels for him—marvels—made sacrifices such as few women would have ventured on. Poor thing, poor thing! she little knows with what result; no, Captain Fortescue, I could not, knowing all I do, far more than poor Mrs. Hallam does, sanction the purchase of Uplands—"

Fortescue could hardly restrain himself, as he heard these insinuations against his friend.

"I fancied from what you said just now, and from what I had also heard, that Hallam was living quite within his income."

"What a thing fancy is," said the lawyer, and he shook his head with mournful emphasis.

"Then do you mean to assert, Mr. Goldsmith, that Frederic Hallam is as deep in debt as ever?"

"My dear sir, I assert nothing; you cannot

expect me to tell tales of my clients. Who is to say why Mr. Frederic Hallam pays me sudden and secret visits? It may be for friendship, for advice, for anything but money."

"Then he does visit you," said Fortescue, as carelessly as he could; "have you seen him lately?"

"I really must decline exposing my client's affairs, even to so deeply interested a friend; but I can answer your last question. No, I have not seen Mr. Hallam for some time past."

"Then you are expecting to see him now?"

Goldsmith threw his head back, and laughed in his peculiar silent way.

"Well, Captain Fortescue," he said, recovering himself and laying his head on one side; "what should you say, now, as a man who has been about town some years, who knows something of the world? The spring of the year offers some attractions to a betting man, eh?"

"Ah then, you know Hallam still bets. I had heard that he had quite given up that sort of thing."

The lawyer relapsed into another silent laugh, which lasted so long that there seemed to be a risk of suffocation.

"You must excuse me," he said at last. "But

you are not quite so innocent as to believe that, I think, Captain Fortescue?"

"I always believe well of my friends. But I must be going, Mr. Goldsmith." He evaded giving any direct reply, and after some more conversation about Gerald Fortescue's affairs, he left the office.

He felt utterly confounded. Something—he could scarcely say what—but an irresistible influence had prevented him from being open with the lawyer. Which had deceived him, Hallam or Goldsmith? and then he thought of the two men, and it was impossible to hesitate. With all his faults, he had always considered his friend truthful and honourable; besides, when he had asked him if his present visit were connected with any racing transactions, Hallam had replied so promptly and frankly, that he had quite given up betting—no—he could not believe he had purposely deceived him. Why should he do so? What end would it serve? However good we may be, it is wonderful how often the rule of expediency suggests itself as a fitting measure by which to try our fellow-men.

He walked on, feeling perplexed how to act; the longer he reflected on the lawyer's ambiguous

words, the stronger grew his belief in his friend's innocence, and again came the question—what motive could Goldsmith have for misrepresenting matters? Fortescue knew that Hallam had a fixed income totally independent of his wife; and, if he lived within it, what possible transactions could take place between him and Goldsmith? Besides, his friend had only that morning said that he and debt were strangers, and likely to continue so.

But, then, if Goldsmith talked in this way to him, he would probably do so to others; at any rate, Hallam ought to know what was said, and have the power of silencing such falsehood, if it were falsehood, and if it were not, after all, Fortescue asked himself, what business was it of his? A week ago he would have declared himself almost indifferent to Frederic Hallam; but now it was different; sight had quickened love, he felt more, and deeper, affection for him than he had ever done, far more esteem than for his own brother;—he would not believe ill of him—it seemed cowardly to allow him to be slandered without giving him warning.

Suddenly he remembered how the lawyer's sorrow

cheek had flushed, and he at once saw, or thought he saw, to the bottom of the mystery. Hallam had probably ridiculed Goldsmith, and given him mortal offence, and he revenged himself by speaking against him; and yet he wondered how he dared to do so openly. If he had known how entirely Goldsmith believed him to be alienated from Hallam, he might have been less surprised; and, shrewd as the lawyer was, he had not calculated on Fortescue's unworldliness; he himself would have been afraid to tell a man anything he had heard against him, for fear of being dragged into what might turn out awkwardly; and he judged the captain by himself. It seems easier for the simple and straight-forward to see through intrigue than for the intriguer to comprehend the ways of sincerity.

Fortescue resolved to see his friend before he left town. He sent a note to his hotel, asking him to come round that evening, as he was himself to start early the following morning. The man returned with the note. Mr. Hallam had left town that afternoon hurriedly, had paid his bill, and driven away with his luggage in a cab—the people did not remember where, but believed

it was to a railway-station: there were so many persons coming and going just at this time of year—it was impossible to keep count of them.

Fortescue's heart sank. Had Hallam gone to the races, after all? He had no leisure to pursue inquiry: he was only in town for a few days, and must return next morning, but, at any rate, he could and would warn Hallam to beware of Goldsmith if he ever had the opportunity, meanwhile he wrote to him to Uplands before he went to bed, telling him what had taken place between himself and the lawyer.

CHAPTER V.

RALPHIE.

HESTER sat bending over the crib in which Ralphie lay, listening for his breathing. Hitherto, it had been loud and irregular, but during the last two hours it was scarcely audible. She had taken off her dress, and sat wrapped in a loose white gown. Paler than ever, her fair hair strained back from her temples, anxious watching had made her look years older already; and the likeness between her and the quiet sufferer was very apparent now: his long lashes lay almost unnaturally dark on his white cheeks, the lips pressed closely together—how soon the mouth tells of health or sickness in a sleeping child—they were not rosy, but almost black with fever, as were also the circles beneath his closed eyelids.

He had been taken ill soon after his father's

departure, and the country doctor—an old-fashioned, ignorant man—had treated it lightly as a slight cold.

Although Hester loved her boy, she never lavished a mother's caresses and tenderness on him; at least no one had ever seen her do so, nor was she, like most young mothers, over anxious about his health. Her husband's care on this point almost excited her contempt. She had two nurses for little Ralphie, and she was scrupulously careful in investigating the ventilation and arrangement of the nurseries; also, at stated times, he came to her in the drawing-room, but no one had ever caught Hester fondling her boy as mothers only can fondle; that is, mothers in general, for Frederic Hallam's tenderness with his child equalled that of any mother. After all, men can be more intensely tender than women, although all do not show it to their children, and, if they do, it is rather to the girls than to the boys.

Therefore, the nurses had felt surprised when the child became decidedly ill, to hear their mistress say she should not leave him again until the London doctor, for whom she had telegraphed to her husband, arrived. She might well look pale and exhausted; she had been by the child's

bedside now for many hours, latterly her sense of hearing strained in different directions. She was listening eagerly for carriage wheels, and also with far deeper anxiety for the imperceptible breathing of the child; suddenly it flashed upon her that he had lain thus since the morning, undisturbed. The doctor had said sleep was more necessary than food; but suppose he were mistaken, and she had no confidence in his skill; the child might be sinking from mere inanition, was it that—that had caused the strange change in his breathing? She bent closer and closer, there was no audible breath; she put her hand on the little heart, there was still a languid movement: for the first time a strong terror seized her—he was dying perhaps. How should she tell Fred his child was dead? He had left him safe and well in her charge; he would look on her as Ralphie's murderess. Why had she not thought sooner how long he had been without food, and yet the doctor had said the fever must be starved while it was so high. She looked eagerly round, there was some milk and water on a little table near; she put her arm under Ralphie's head, and tried to raise it; it was like fire in its scorching heat.

“Ralphie, darling, Ralphie,” she murmured, “papa’s coming; Ralphie, wake up and see papa.”

She knew, as if by instinct, the sure talisman of her boy’s love, for, although he tyrannized over his father, the child loved him passionately.

No answer came, the little limbs seemed to Hester to be growing set and rigid; she tried to open the closely pressed lips, but the jaws were firmly pressed together, and resisted all her efforts, weakened by the terror of hurting the unconscious sufferer.

She looked round again in the mechanical way in which people seek in some mortal peril for outward help, and as she did so, her eyes fell on her open desk, where she had written the telegram.

She gently laid the child’s head on the pillow, and passing swiftly round, took up the quill pen from the desk, dipped the feathered end into the milk and water, and again raising his head, she touched the lips several times before they unclosed, and then she managed to drop the liquid from the end of the feather into the mouth. Little by little, the rigid jaws relaxed and parted,

the eyes opened slowly, but without any ray of intelligence, and as they did this for the second time, her sharpened sense heard the wheels at last. They came nearer and nearer, but she dared not withdraw her arm from Ralphie; she felt that the slightest movement might extinguish his re-awakened life. So she stood,—still as the senseless child, almost as white as her dress, waiting for what she felt would be her boy's doom.

It seemed long to her before the door opened; the nurse just looked into the room, then went away, and, after a few moments, Frederic Hallam entered, followed by a stout, middle-aged man, with remarkably intelligent eyes and a square massive head.

He bent over Ralphie for a few moments, asking for more light as he did so, for the blinds were drawn down. Then turning to Hester, he asked sharply and rapidly, how long the child had been insensible, and what nourishment it had taken. He started back at her answer, and threw up both his arms.

"You're killing him," he said, roughly; "the only chance for that child now is constant susten-

ance, if it be only a tea-spoonful at a time. What did you say you gave him with the feather?"

It was wonderful how his manner subdued her; she answered as meekly as a child.

"Milk and water!" said the doctor, with a contemptuous emphasis; "it should be brandy, ma'am, and must be, if you want to keep your boy. Will you be so good as to put me a tea-spoonful of brandy into a wine glass of water."

"But, doctor," said a gentle, plaintive voice behind him, "I never heard of giving so young a child brandy; there must be fearful risk of increasing the fever."

The doctor only looked at her in his quick decided way, and turning to Fred said,—

"The fewer here the better; leave your wife, she knows what she's about."

Mrs. Hallam looked aghast at such uncourteous treatment; but she submitted to take her son's arm, and allow him to conduct her to her bed-chamber.

The stupor lasted, and for longer than a week Ralphie's life seemed to be more than doubtful.

The London doctor had warned Hester em-

phatically that medicine could be of scarcely any service in comparison with nourishment, in fact, that recovery depended entirely on the vigilant care with which the child was nursed; and except for a few hours of necessary rest, she rarely left the room. And yet even at such a time as this, when a mutual sympathy seemed to be drawing her again towards her husband, she was as coldly on her guard as ever, as if she feared to let some hidden feeling escape.

Spite of his absorbing anxiety about the child, Hallam was greatly touched by her unremitting care and watchfulness, still to him, disposed to take the most favourable view of her conduct, her devotion seemed more like the enforced fulfilment of duty than the outpouring of maternal affection.

His mother apparently could not refrain from expressing her opinion. She was herself one of those women with feelings always on the surface ready for use. I am not sure whether she considered feeling of any value, if kept out of sight. She could not understand or sound the deeps of a self-repressed heart, too intense in its affection to expose it to common eyes.

There is a medium between these natures, and a happier one, I think, both for themselves and others. One expects a woman's affection to be demonstrative, although it need not be so displayed, as to excite ridicule; but there is something that savours as strongly of self-love, in the woman who so represses feeling as to grieve and disappoint those dear to her, as of self-conceit in her who makes a lavish display of wifely or motherly devotion. The only superior claim of the former is, that we believe this article to be a genuine one; the latter we consider merely imitation silver-gilt.

But Mrs. Hallam considered herself, or perhaps it is more just to say, wished others to consider her, a model mother. She had undergone an immense amount of petty interference (spite of her rich connections) from her sister-in-law in the management of Fred, and it was right and fitting she should have her turn again. To women of very shallow understanding and limited powers of intellect, there is probably no occupation more delightful than either mentally or practically setting their neighbours to rights. When we are young and still smarting from the pricks of some well-

meaning busy-body, who—his feelings being only skin deep—passes for “such a kind, good-tempered creature,” we resolve, when the power of interference falls to our lot, that things shall be quite different; how magnanimous we will then be, how large-minded; in fact, we shoot a load of paving stones in the road of our future, which would take a lifetime, and a most conscientious one too, to lay properly.

The older one grows, the more impossible does it become to judge what one's opinions would be under differing circumstances. A Right and a Wrong there must always be, a Truth and a Falsehood; but, between these, how wide a plain spreads itself, over which different shades of opinion are riding a steeple-chase blindfold. One asks oneself sometimes, is there such a thing as beauty, as age, as talent, as worldliness, or simplicity of heart, as sincerity or courtesy. When one sees how that little piece of coloured glass each neighbour wears in his eye changes the hue—nay, the very quality of the attribute—what can one do in such a turmoil? Must we distrust our own judgment, and cling to that of each of our fellow creatures in turn, with whom we may chance to

feel sympathy, or who may obtain a temporary influence over us ?

I do not think so ; we may distrust our own judgment on high grounds, and especially if we allow it to be guided by impulse or self-will, and also because we see that it is unconsciously influenced by outward circumstances. The preaching our own opinions, *vivâ voce*, seems the worst evil, if we can only have sufficient self-control and courtesy to economise them, we may learn very much from our neighbours ; their very follies, and narrow-minded enunciation of their own theories, may serve to warn us against similar absurdities.

Mrs. Hallam, however, did not share one weakness of her sex ; if she interfered, it was personally ; she did not screen herself behind other people's opinions, and try to make you swallow the unpleasant potion, *réchauffé*.

"Frederic, does Hester ever kiss Ralph ?" Mrs. Hallam did not choose to call him "Ralphie."

Her son started, he and his mother were walking up and down the garden on the moated side. She had been vainly trying to persuade him that his child would recover.

"Yes, mother, of course she does; she would scarcely be the devoted nurse she is, if she were not very fond of him."

"Ah, well, that does not follow, my dear Frederic; you are such an affectionate fellow, that you think all others the same; but, you know, I always did consider Hester cold, and I think so still. I do not think I have ever seen her kiss the child."

It was a hard position for Hallam: could he contradict her, when his heart was aching with longing for the love his wife would not give? Would not—there was the secret of his sorrow—he knew too well that Hester could love if she chose; she had worshipped him once. The doubt that tormented him was whether her love was, indeed, cold and dead for ever; whether her unforgivingness would for ever render it impossible for him to re-awaken it from slumber.

"There are people," he said, at last, "whose feelings are just as warm towards their children as others who make more fuss in displaying them. I pet that little darling,"—he turned away his head, his voice quivering as he spoke—"more than his mother does, and yet I could not have

nursed him as she has done; it is only motherly love and instinct that can anticipate wants and possible evils."

"You're quite mistaken, Frederic; nursing is a gift which comes to people naturally. In any case, Hester would be an excellent nurse, nothing shows it more than her reluctance to divide her charge with any one. Really, she is quite strange about it; I went into the room just now as quietly as possible, and suggested, in the lowest possible whisper, that toast-and-water should be occasionally substituted for these constant stimulants——"

"I am sorry you went in, mother. Hester told me yesterday, she wished for no one but nurse and myself, and she is only following out the doctor's instructions."

"My dear Frederic, you must not spoil your wife; I speak, my dear boy," and she laid her soft white hand tenderly on his shoulder,—“I speak out of the effusion of a mother's love. You are the child's father as much as Hester is it's mother, and you have as much right to govern in the sickroom as she has; really her manner to me just now was quite wanting in common sense."

"Just the quality I consider Hester so very gifted in."

His mother shrugged her shoulders.

"What has come over you, Frederic? Three years ago you used almost always to see things as I did; now, perhaps, you consider it right for your wife to insult your mother in her own house."

"Mother! you know I could not," he said, affectionately drawing her arm though his; "but even if poor Hester has been a little abrupt and hasty with you, you will excuse it, I know; she is so over-wrought and anxious that I can only wonder at her calmness. I know this morning, after my last night's watch, I was nervous and excitable enough to quarrel with any one."

"Oh, your wife said nothing, but I consider that at least she should have answered me. She only looked at me in that hard, cold, reproving way she can when she chooses, and pointed to the door—pointed so steadily and determinedly, that I was obliged to leave the room. It was not proper behaviour from a daughter towards a mother, Frederic," and Mrs. Hallam hid her eyes with her handkerchief.

If he had not been a dutiful son, he might, perhaps, have thought it scarcely kind behaviour in his mother to upbraid him with Hester's conduct when he was so torn and depressed with anxiety for little Ralphie ; but he had learned so to long for affection, and by nature he was so peaceful, that he only felt sorry his mother and his wife should have come into collision ; and a little judicious soothing, and an assurance that probably the child was restless, and therefore she feared he might be disturbed, smoothed Mrs. Hallam's offended—not dignity, because she really had none that was real—but the pretension which supplied its place, and prevented her from lecturing her son as she had intended.

She had only stayed at Uplands once before, and that was during Hester's absence—Frederic Hallam shrank from exposing his domestic unhappiness—so that with her remembrance of the former terms on which they lived, Mrs. Hallam had been greatly struck by the marked change in Hester's manner to her husband, even in the slight opportunity she had had of seeing them together. Nor only to her husband ; she seemed to rule all with a quiet firm hand, to which they

submitted implicitly. Parkins was now head-nurse, but although the same managing despotic person towards her fellow servants, she was a changed being in her manner towards her mistress; perhaps she was the best proof of Hester's strength of purpose. Most girls would have chosen to dismiss a servant who had given herself "airs," and might have an inconvenient remembrance of the difficulty her mistress had found in fitting herself to her new state of life; but Hester recognized Parkins's talents, and real worth, and probably thought that the surest way of silencing any gossip about herself and her husband, was to attach her interests so firmly to theirs as to make her wish to remain with them. All this Mrs. Hallam saw, and she grew more and more puzzled. She had fully intended to speak seriously to her son on the subject of being ruled by his wife, but for the present he had averted what would have been a trying discussion. She resolved to watch them very closely when Ralphie was better, and to write to Martha Hallam and ask her advice.

CHAPTER VI.

A VOW.

HALLAM smiled sadly to himself after his mother went into the house. He had often asked her question mentally, and being persuaded that no one could help loving Ralphie, thought it was a part of his wife's contradictory nature, or rather her determination, not to sympathize with him in any way, that she showed so little love for their child. If Ralphie had seemed fonder of his mother, he would have thought she petted him when he was not by; but the child's preference for his father was too evident, and yet if Hallam had been a deeper thinker, or what would have served the same purpose, had accustomed himself to analyze as well as to observe human nature, he might have known that the true secret of Ralphie's preference besides the

instinctive knowledge children have of those who love children, was the difference of their natures. The child resembled his mother as much in mind as in body, and consequently the same qualities had power over his affections.

Hallam probably could scarcely have said when he first began to love Hester—but he was learning every day, more and more deeply, how closely united was his love for his wife and child—it would have been impossible now to tell which he loved in the other. He wandered into the stable-yard, then out through the arched entrance, and over the bridge on to the grass in front of the avenue.

But he turned sharply away as he remembered the last time he had played there with Ralphie. What would he give to have his darling, for one half-hour again? and then came the unspeakable agony—the dread which makes the strongest man's courage fail—that the hand of Death was on his child. For the little fellow had been very weak all day, and the London doctor, who had come down again to see him, had said that a few hours would decide the result of his illness: he would either sink or rally.

It has often been said before—and yet in his own experience each seems to realize, for the first time—how much harder any cross, any anxiety is to bear when it involves a necessity for passive resignation. There was nothing to be done for Ralphie, absolutely nothing the doctor had said, but to hope for the best. And this nothing seemed to Frederic Hallam so very hard to bear as he walked beside the moat which, still bounded by the picturesque low wall before mentioned, extended for some distance along the whole range of fruit and vegetable gardens, and turning in a sharp angle at their furthest extremity, followed their course round two other sides till it again reached the front, where a dry grassed ditch took its place.

The ground at the farthest boundary of the fruit gardens was rugged, and broken into little steepes and hollows, overgrown with gorse and brake. In some places, where the upper ground had evidently crumbled away, the hollows were deeper, clothed at the bottom with soft green turf, while at the top the rough edges of bright yellow gravel were fringed with that peculiarly long fine grass one only finds on commons. The heather

and ling were just beginning to put out fresh green shoots, and in some places the ling had a few early blossoms; but the purple wealth of an August common was wanting; the hedge-rows and meadows are doubtless richest in flowers in April and May, but there is no time like autumn for the heathland, with its glorious contrasts of colour.

It was all alike to Hallam as he walked along, his hands clasped listlessly behind him, his head bent on his breast. Suddenly the brake rustled beside him, and in another moment something rough and warm pressed against his hands, and then Bevis's cold nose was thrust searchingly into them.

The creature had been restless and uneasy from the day he had missed Ralphie, and more than once had refused to accompany his master on a walk, turning back continually as if in search of his little companion. He would spend hours on the grass where they usually played, snuffing all about and trying to find the scent in each direction, then, standing baffled for an instant, would begin again as unweariedly as ever. But to-day he seemed in a different mood; he walked

quietly beside Hallam, his long ears drooping and his head depressed; his master turned presently and looked at him.

“Poor old dog, you miss Ralphie, don’t you, Beewee?”

Either the child’s name or the father’s sad face as he pronounced the dog’s pet title refreshed his memory, and Bevis laid himself down at Hallam’s feet, and uttered that prolonged melancholy sound which only a bloodhound can give tongue to. It seemed to Hallam like the death-wail of his child. Hitherto he had borne up bravely, for one of his impressionable temperament. However, as the quinquina tree is always found in low unhealthy places, so those who are the most impressionable, are, by God’s mercy, the most sanguine also.

It seems to be the lot of strong enduring natures, like Hester’s, to look on the black side of things, to take any short cut, however gloomy and dreary, to meet evil half way, while a buoyant spirit will go a long way round to avoid it, if by so doing he can keep on a broad sunshiny road.

But when the dog raised his head and looked in his face, his large mournful eyes filled with tears, Hallam could bear up no longer; he was

standing on the brink of one of the hollows, and turning from the dog, he plunged suddenly down it, and throwing himself on the turf, burst into an agony of grief.

The dog did not come to comfort his master, perhaps he thought it right that all should lament for Ralphie; he stood still, his head and long ears drooping almost to the ground; but when, after a while, exhausted by the violence of his grief, Hallam raised himself and looked round, the creature came quietly and licked his hands in quite a different way from his usual lordly behaviour—for Bevis was not playful or gentle with any one but Ralphie; but in such sorrow as Hallam's, the out-pouring of a heart which could no longer bear its burden, he wanted perfect solitude, and Bevis, finding his advances disregarded, withdrew again from the hollow, and walked slowly away among the bracken.

“Why was this sorrow sent him?”—we ask this question sometimes in impatience, but how often the answer comes like a revelation.

Here in this wild solitude, with nothing to distract his concentrated sense, through eye or ear, except such sights and sounds as were too

familiar to disturb him, Hallam sate as if waiting for a reply.

And then as none came, his evil angels crowded round, and, unconscious of his prompters, he told himself it was very hard that every joy should be dashed away, just as he was ready to drink it. It had been the same with Hester, just as he had found out her good qualities, and could soon have brought himself to love her—for had he not loved her, spite of all?—she had learned to despise him; and, after all, he went on proudly, there was nothing to despise in him now; how different his life had been since Ralphie's birth, and since he had come to Uplands. But what if the child died? His friend the rector—Frederic, had not reckoned him up among his good influences, although he often said to others, what a happy thing it was to have among them a man who lived up to so high a standard as Edward King—had told him that very morning, after he had paid his daily visit to the sick room, that he ought to prepare himself for the worst; and that if Ralphie were taken away, it would be in love and not in anger. Hallam's heart rebelled against this; he was no hypocrite; he said he

could not be resigned to such a loss. He knew that Ralphie was the firm ground to which were anchored, and kept from shipwreck, all his good purposes, all his new-found unselfishness and forbearing endurance of his wife's conduct, and more than this, all his repentance for his former worldly life and deeds. If Ralphie were taken, he must drift away back among the breakers and be lost; he could see only a life of sin and sorrow before him, if his darling died.

But although at times the best of us may thus be tempted by the specious clouds which thrust themselves between our souls and their true light; if we have really prayed and tried to live well, instead of being content with good intentions, we shall not be left to the mercy of our invisible enemies.

Hallam sate still thinking, or rather trying to think, in that hard, dry-minded state, when every faculty becomes sullen and debased; and it seems impossible that warmth and love to either God or man can ever re-visit the heart. A torpor appeared to be creeping over his limbs also.

He rose to his feet, and as he did so, there was a tremulous movement in the green cushion on

which he had been lying. Hundreds of tiny white and yellow flowers, streaked with purple, raised their fragile heads again, and looked up to heaven as brightly as before, as if in thankfulness for their release. Even through the midst of his gloom, the remembrance came to Hallam that he had heard of this little flower, and how brightly it always up-sprung after a weight that would have destroyed the life of many; he stooped and gathered some, and then slowly left the hollow. His heart swelled in the wider, freer atmosphere, and as he looked at the little eye-bright again, and remembered what Ralphie's delight would have been to find it, the weight was lifted, and tears once more filled his eyes, but they brought soothing with them. He sank down on his knees; if *nothing* could be done for Ralphie by mere human aid, was not prayer far more efficient than any mortal care could be? He prayed earnestly that the child might be restored to him, and then in the very prayer itself, as if fearing he was asking too much, he added, if God so willed.

And as the charmed circle in which he knelt widened, and the evil shadows withdrew, with frowning baffled faces, his mind grew each moment

clearer, and he saw truly that Ralphie was not the rock on which he trusted; he was rather the anchor which held him fast to the better land, the beacon which had been in mercy shown, to lead him on by its borrowed light. And what was his repentance worth, if it had not brought him to acknowledge that he owed an atonement for past offences; and if this were to be his destined punishment, ought *he* to struggle and rebel, he who was growing each day more and more keenly alive to the besetting infirmities of his nature? But try as he would, he was only human; the sharp agony came again, the unutterable longing that he might have this one blessing spared to him; and amid this came also a more searching question—what if Ralphie were to be taken away for his own sake, from parents who could not live lovingly together? It was a startling question, but the answer followed rapidly. If it were not right for Ralphie to witness such a life, could it be right in God's eyes? Was it safe to live it? Could he ever tell himself he had truly repented of the past, till he had made atonement for it? Till this morning he had well-nigh forgotten how black that Past had been. Then, in turning

over an old pocket-book, he had found, in an inner pocket, hidden out of sight, the agreement written by himself for Goldsmith to sign. He had shrunk with horror at the discovery of such baseness ; but for this written witness, he would not have believed he could have meditated such treachery.

Now he drew the paper forth, and tearing it in pieces, scattered it to the wind, and with bowed head and clasped hands solemnly there, on the lonely heath, Frederic Hallam vowed that if Ralphie were once spared to him, he would humble his pride to the very dust in seeking a reconciliation with his wife.

Tea was waiting when he returned. Hester had sent down word that she should not leave her charge even for a moment, and he found his mother quite uneasy and fidgety at his long absence as he passed from the lawn through the open library window on his way up-stairs.

He paused at Ralphie's door, and listened before he entered ; a large screen hid him, and he had opened the door noiselessly. There was a sound of lamentation within the room, his first impulse

was to rush forward, fearing some evil to Ralphie; but Hester's voice, in broken, agonized tones, restrained him; it seemed as if he dared not break suddenly in upon her sorrow.

“Oh, my child, my boy!” he heard indistinctly murmured, as if she were smothering the sound on his pillow, “shall I lose you just when I love you best? Oh, how can I bear it?”

And then came a sobbing silence. It seemed to Hallam that he had been specially led there—that now was the moment of reunion; but he would not intrude on her suddenly: the singular outburst from one so reserved and guarded as Hester, had never been meant to be overheard, and she should not be wounded by his knowledge of it.

He leant against the door, and, turning the handle more loudly than usual, entered the room slowly from behind the screen.

Had his ears deceived him? Hester sat beside the little bed, with the same cold, passionless face she always wore in his presence. For an instant his soul shrank back; how could he tempt a quarrel (for any overture on his part had hitherto provoked bitter words) beside his dying child?

But what had he just vowed? He went up to Hester, he saw her eyes were swollen with weeping, and tried to take her hand; coldly, slowly, she withdrew it, and rising moved away from Ralphie's bed, beckoning her husband to follow her.

"I am not very tired, thank you," she said, in what she wished to be a softened manner, but which the strong restraint she maintained rendered painfully repelling. "I do not wish to leave him for an instant; both nurses are within call; I will send for you directly there is a change."

"I cannot leave him now," said Hallam, cut to the heart by her evident wish for his absence, when he thought they might each so have supported the other.

"Then we must not speak," she said, simply; "the slightest shock to the brain now would be fatal."

CHAPTER VII.

MARTHA HALLAM AT STEDDING.

THE wonder of the Misses Skipper was at its height. Miss Hallam had arrived at the rectory, and had been seen to bow to Mrs. Wrenshaw and her daughter as they came out of church on Sunday morning. What was going to happen next? Was this family difference—the favourite source of lamentation with Miss Jemima and her sisters; in fact, so stock a topic, that I scarcely know how they would have enjoyed the last three years as they had done, without it—“was this,” as Miss Jemima in her happy choice of words would certainly have said, “going to become a thing of the past?” and I am afraid a disappointed feeling crept over the minds of the three ladies, for, if a reconciliation were to take place between the Hallams and the Bonhams, there would be no blame to attach anywhere—

no possibility of echoing and re-echoing those two favourite sentences, "There are always faults on both sides," and "One story is good till another is told."

If they had known Martha Hallam better, they would have thought her courtesy still more surprising: it was so foreign to her whole character and the nature of her prejudices to seek fresh acquaintance. What had served her father and mother before her would do for her; nothing would persuade her that society—in other words fellowship with fellow men and women—would not involve what she pleased to call "the levelling principle;" if she could only have submitted the crooked corners and angles of her mind—which had been allowed from childhood to grow unmolested until they had become distortions—to the lathe of contradiction and contrary opinion—which can only be administered advantageously to such a temper as hers in mixed society, from the self-control the presence of strangers enforces on the most wilful—many new and interesting thoughts, infinite enjoyment of the mind and talents, and, above all, the sympathies and affections of

others might have been opened to Martha Hallam; but, moving thus in one narrow special circle of friends, who all knew her too well to contradict her openly, although they probably laughed at her behind her back, she kept to her original creed, that she and all belonging immediately to her were infallible, and in only believing what she chose to believe.

But she had some Popes, some few privileged individuals from whom to promulgate the "they say," which has such mighty power over the credulous many, and the Ainsworths were among these.

Therefore when Mrs. Ainsworth told her of the high estimation in which she, her husband, and indeed all the Stedding people held Mr. and Mrs. Bonham, she remembered that she was in some way connected with these favoured people, and that it would be well to distinguish them by her notice; hence had come the greeting witnessed by Miss Jemima and her sisters, and hence also a dignified acquiescence when Mrs. Ainsworth suggested they should call on Mrs. Bonham.

"I think it would be only kind. I know poor

Mrs. Bonham has felt very much the estrangement from her cousin; you could tell her a good deal about her, of course. It is not your place to call first," she continued, for, although good and charitable to the poor, the wife of the rector of Stedding was a formal and rigid exacter and renderer of ceremonial duties, for the neglect of which she frequently reprimanded her far more liberal-minded husband, "but, with this coldness in the family, Mrs. Bonham would scarcely like to call."

"I should think not," said Miss Hallam, drawing up her prim figure with an emphasis perfectly understood by her companion; it said, as plainly as words could do, by implication, "I should like to see a mere country doctor's wife calling on ME, Martha Hallam, of London."

"And," Mrs. Ainsworth went on, "as, perhaps, she may wish to ask you many questions entirely relating to family matters, I shall just introduce you, and then call for you again in half an hour's time, that is, if you would like such an arrangement."

"Well, it might be as well; there are one or two things I should like to say to this Mrs. Bonham."

It had come into her busy brain that there might, after all, be some communication between the cousins; she would not believe that any woman would so completely alienate herself from those among whom she lived, as, from Mrs. Hallam's account, Hester persisted in doing, unless she had some other object on which to bestow her affections. She felt very angry with her niece just now. On hearing of Raphie's illness, she had at once written to ask if she should not go down and assist in nursing him; and Fred, her own darling nephew, for whom she had done so much, had been made by his wife—she was sure it was no voluntary act on his part—to send her a polite, though decided refusal.

It was incredible! her assistance had never been refused before; she was such an excellent nurse, so well accustomed to children; well, they might ask long enough before she took the pains to revisit Uplands. She had forgiven Fred; it was not his fault, of course, except that he ought not be ruled by his wife; but when Mrs. Hallam's letter came confirming the last idea, and speaking of the change in Fred's spirits, Martha felt strongly moved to journey to Uplands at once,

and remonstrate with the young wife on her husband's want of cheerfulness. However, after all—for Louisa was extremely fanciful—it might be the natural depression caused by the little boy's anxious state, not that she believed him in danger, oh, dear, no! mothers and grandmothers always exaggerated childish complaints; it was just a feverish cold, as the doctor had said at first. Of course, if they would make a fuss, and send for a London doctor, the poor man was obliged to say something to earn his fee, and the more danger he created in imagination, the greater would be the merit of the cure.

“Just the way with all doctors,” as she remarked to Mrs. Bonham, in giving her an account of the matter without at all considering her inadvertence.

She had been agreeably surprised in Lucy; she had not in any way expected to see, as she afterwards expressed it, “so pretty and tasteful a little woman,” and the neat, well-ordered house, and pretty, simply-dressed children, whom she met just returning from their walk, clad in brown-holland skirts and jackets, so that they might scramble after wild flowers, were all duly appre-

ciated by one who fully valued "the nicenesses" of life.

Lucy received her courteously, but with none of the flutter she expected her appearance would create, and if she did feel nervous inwardly, it was not at Miss Hallam's high and mighty condescension in calling, but because she was at last going to hear news of her absent cousin.

She was greatly disappointed to find that she was expected rather to give information than to receive it.

"I have not seen my niece, Mrs. Frederick Hallam, for a very long time ; she is a fine, tall, elegant young woman. I should rather say, perhaps, gives promise of elegance, but she is very abrupt : was she always abrupt, Mrs.—I beg your pardon—I always forget your name."

Lucy smiled ; perhaps she thought it a pity Miss Hallam should forget the name of the person she was speaking to.

"My cousin Hester had always a reserved manner. She thinks a great deal more than most people do."

"Ah ! she is your cousin, you know ; of course you think a good deal of her ; but I should have

said from her manner that she had seen very little society before marriage."

She had underrated Lucy's intelligence; like lightning flashed on her quick perceptions that the purport of this visit was to discover Hester's antecedents; she thought she began to see why her cousin had broken with her own family; if her surmise were correct, at any rate, Miss Hallam should get no satisfaction from her.

"We were a good deal together before marriage," she said, quietly, "and were always great friends. How do you like Stedding?"

And each time Miss Hallam returned to the charge, she managed to evade her inquiries, and yet with such quiet courtesy that her visitor, though feeling inwardly foiled, could not really have any cause of complaint against her.

There was something that attracted her, spite of herself, in Lucy; she was so lively, and seemed to take the same cheerful view of things that she herself did. She almost felt inclined to confide in her, and tell her that Fred was no longer happy with her cousin; but then she remembered that her sister-in-law had distinctly said in her letter that he was fonder of his wife than ever,

and would not hear a word against her. She could not bring herself to own to Hester's cousin that Fred's happiness was dependent on his wife's love; no, Martha Hallam's creed for husbands and wives was, that no love could be sufficient for a wife to give to her husband, and in return she ought to be thankful and content with any crumbs of affection he might deign to throw over his left shoulder, supposing, of course, the man to be a Hallam.

The half hour slipped away while she was still undecided, and Lucy was eagerly showing her baby and expatiating on its health, skin, number of teeth, and other perfections in which young mothers claim universal sympathy from womankind, and Lucy was very enthusiastic on the topic, when in came Jacob Bonham.

He walked straight up to his wife and kissed her; he had not seen her since breakfast time, and he and Lucy had always kept up lover-like ways. But when he turned round as Lucy introduced him to Miss Hallam, and held out his hand to her, she seemed to be afraid that the operation was about to be repeated on herself, her face puckered into a most reproving aspect, and,

keeping her hands firmly pressed together, she merely bent stiffly in answer to his greeting.

Lucy could scarcely help laughing; but Jacob came to her assistance.

"I passed Mrs. Ainsworth and your mother walking together, Lucy," he said; "I think they will be here soon."

Almost as he spoke came Mrs. Wrenshaw's short imperative knock, and, full of bustle and smiles, rosy health and eager curiosity, she ushered her companion into the drawing-room.

Miss Hallam tried to keep her at a distance by stately courtesy; it was quite enough to shake hands with the Bonhams; but really this person, no relation of Hester's, only her aunt by marriage, was more than she felt called on to tolerate. But Mrs. Wrenshaw was not to be awed; with her happy, insensitive nature she quite omitted to receive what Miss Hallam's silence and coldness were intended to convey; she thought the poor lady was shy at finding herself among strangers, and only laboured the harder to entertain her while Mrs. Ainsworth, Jacob and Lucy were talking parish business.

"I declare, ma'am, I thought we were never

to have the pleasure of seeing you ; I am so glad we've met : it seems so much more Christian-like, in every way, for connections to be friendly together. I'm sure I scarcely know though," she went on, " the exact degree of relationship between you and me, Miss Hallam ; let me see, I'm Mrs. Frederic Hallam's aunt, and you are Mr. Frederic Hallam's aunt ; can you make it out, I can't. It comes to a something, but I don't know what." And she burst into a fit of laughter.

" No," said Miss Hallam, shaking her head grimly, and feeling that she could not possibly tolerate such freedom, " I do not see that I have the honour of being in any way connected with you, madam. Mrs. Ainsworth," she said, rising, " I fear we are taking up Mrs. Bonham's valuable time," and, managing to escape Mrs. Wrenshaw's proffered hand in the general farewell that followed, she departed with her friend, feeling that she had been grievously insulted by Hester's vulgar aunt by marriage.

" What a nice pleasant-spoken person Miss Hallam is !" said poor unconscious Mrs. Frank to her daughter ; " painfully shy though : she quite makes grimaces from nervousness."

CHAPTER VIII.

BIZ AT UPLANDS.

HESTER sate alone in her own study, a handsomely furnished room, but with little about it to betray female habitation.

There were books, but they were chiefly educational or philosophical volumes, a few of the heavier magazines, strong substantial-looking writing materials, and several brass-clasped account books—for Hester regularly overlooked her bailiff's accounts; her husband had offered to relieve her from this charge, but she declined his assistance; he had the garden and flowers and the gardeners' expenses to control, she said, it was well for her to have an occupation also.

She sate now at her writing table with an open letter before her. It was from Miss Hallam, and had arrived that morning, enclosed in one to her mother-in-law.

Wordy, ill-expressed, and diffuse, it yet seemed to possess wonderful power over Hester. She read it, and read it again, and each time was plunged into deeper thought than before.

She was pale and thin from her constant nursing, but still there was a slight flush on her cheek, and a light in her eyes, that spoke rather of pleasurable than of painful anticipation.

And was this description a true picture of Lucy's lot? Lucy, whose affectionate letter, written to congratulate her on her child's birth, she had treated with indifference as an overture to reconciliation, simply because she was rich and because Mr. Bonham thought it wise for his wife to be friends with her wealthy cousin. From her own experience of it, Hester so hated poverty that it was impossible to her to imagine others could be happy unless they were rich; now, as she read her aunt's minute description of this bright, loving, happy home, a keen feeling of jealousy rose in her heart.

"She always was happier than I; she had a kind mother, a good education, and all she wished for, and now she has a husband and children who love her; it is unjust she should have every blessing in the world."

The last words calmed her. Her aunt's letter did not say that Lucy was rich in what the world calls blessings. She said the house was neat but very simply furnished, and that the chief ornaments in the drawing-room were a few of Lucy's own sketches, some pretty books, and a profusion of flowers. Miss Hallam had taken delight in saying all this, as her niece's want of taste in arrangement and minor details had been a very sore point with her, knowing how Fred cared about such things. "People can *not* be really happy without money," argued Hester; "it is all very well now, but when Lucy has six children instead of three, how are they to be clothed, and fed, and educated, if means are so scanty now?"

So people are apt to argue who have little practical faith in God's goodness, and who cannot believe that to those who implicitly trust in his love, using, of course, to the full extent, every talent He has bestowed, the burden will never press too heavily—as their day, so will their strength be.

But Hester saw only the black side.

Poor Lucy would in time become a mere drudge. Even the affection her aunt described so minutely

would not compensate for such incessant daily toil. Hester's heart had hardened during this long abstinence, for, in resolving not to love her husband or believe in him again, she forgot that she deliberately nourished Revenge, and any one deadly sin is never satisfied to be shut up in the soul alone, but soon calls his fellows around him, and Self-Love first of all.

But still she was not satisfied with her own argument. She took the letter up and read it again; this time more carefully than ever, and when she came to the description of Lucy's smile when her husband entered, and the light that sparkled in her eyes—for Miss Hallam declared that she seemed quite another creature in his presence—(although, for her part, she thought he was too affectionate to be quite gentlemanlike,) Hester clasped her hands fervently together, and wished that she had not married a gentleman, or, at any rate, that her husband had loved her.

“And did he not love her now?”

This was a question that had first forced itself upon her in the solitude of her child's sick room, dating from that night—burnt into her memory—when the fever reached its crisis, and when,

returning from his lonely ramble on the heath-land, Hallam's eyes had told his wife far more than her repelling manner had allowed him to speak.

She had seen little of him since then. The crisis favourably passed, the child's progress towards recovery had been singularly rapid, and his father had insisted on sleeping in his room, and spending a great part of each day with him. Hester was ordered complete rest, and as much air as possible—the confinement had tried her severely, and, although she would not own it, she felt weak and languid.

She rode or drove the greater part of each day, and Mrs. Hallam generally accompanied her, so that she rarely saw her husband alone.

But if he did love her—what then? could she ever love or trust him again—the man who had taught her the sad reality of falsehood under the most sacred form of love? No. It was impossible. Hester had not knowingly been acting a part all this time. She told her husband she despised him, and she told herself so till she believed it; or, perhaps, it is more true to her nature to say, that she willed to despise him, and therefore she did so. She had accustomed herself ever since

that fatal revulsion of feeling, when scales seemed suddenly to have dropped from her eyes, to look upon him as a mere frivolous man of fashion, without any reading or mental resources in which she could sympathize; his love for flowers was to her childish, as day by day she plunged deeper into abstruse and philosophical studies—all lighter pursuits became trivial and unworthy of anything so exalted as a cultivated human intellect. Intellect—that is to say, intellect in the shape of learning and acquirements—was the idol she worshipped even more than wealth. If her husband read anything it was only a novel, or some equally trifling book.

Hester considered that there was far greater talent in laborious historical or biographical compilations, with, perhaps, scarce twenty pages of original composition, than in the most brilliant creations of genius. She had none of the Divine Gift within her, and she could not understand its value, or distinguish between it and the painstaking plodding of second or third rate talent, and wherever this gift, or the power of appreciating it, is entirely wanting, there is sure to be a narrowness of mind and judgment, and harsh

opinion of others. Those whose lively imagination sharpens their sense of ridicule, may laugh at their neighbours, but they rarely judge their motives severely, or fancy they understand the workings of their brother's mind better than he does himself.

Hester was surprised at herself to-day when the question of her husband's love had first presented itself. She had not believed in his previous steady quiet life, looking on it merely as the result of necessity, as, since his father's legacy to him had been realized, he could expect no further assistance till his mother died. She had still said to herself she did not believe in it. She had grown used to her own solitary unloving existence, she hated change, and scenes, and explanations; besides, it would be worse than ever if, after a reconciliation, she found herself, as she fully believed she should do, unable to respect him sufficiently to return his love. But this picture of Lucy and Jacob haunted her; why should they have a happiness superior to hers? surely, however weak he might be, Frederic—she never called him Fred now—was equal to Jacob Bonham, and surely she was superior to Lucy.

She stopped here suddenly. What part did Lucy seem to have in this happiness; there was no word in aunt Martha's letter of the young wife's talents, or learning, or prudence, or even housewifely skill, although, perhaps, what was said in praise of the children's appearance might hint at that, and yet her aunt said distinctly that Hester would be glad to hear how happy Lucy made her husband, and what a pattern wife she was. How could aunt Martha know this? And then came the description of the joy they seemed to feel in each other's presence. She wondered if Frederic felt happier in hers—was *she* glad if he came unexpectedly into her study? No; she was not, and her absent look and constrained manner always told him he was unwelcome.

And yet, how or why she scarcely knew, ever since those lonely watches during Ralphie's illness, when the sick-room had been kept so darkened, that she could not plunge herself for resource against inward conviction into her favourite studies, her thoughts had dwelt much upon her husband, and she had awakened to the perception of what she might have known long before, had she not resolutely excluded him

from her thoughts as well as from her affections—that he was an entirely changed man.

But the fearful doubt begot of her father's suspicious nature, which for awhile her new belief in human love had lulled asleep, rebuked her sharply for her weakness, and whispered to her softening heart that all this was unreal, and that if, after having been once wilfully deceived, she should be so weak-minded as to trust her husband again, he would take advantage of it, to ruin the fortune which Mr. Goldsmith assured her, with care, she might yet bequeath to her child.

Troubled with these conflicting thoughts, she could not settle to anything this morning; she felt angry with herself that the chatter of a foolish person, like aunt Martha, should so disturb her.

There was a tap at the door, for her study was not to be rashly invaded, and Parkins entered.

She had grown into a comely, stout, kindly-looking woman; probably country air and good health had aided in softening her temper.

She was smiling now as if she bore good news.

"If you please, ma'am, there's an old woman come from Stedding; she says her business is only with you, and I was to say her name was Biz."

To Parkins's surprise, the colour rose in her mistress's face, and then she turned so white that the woman thought she was ill, and advanced towards her.

"No, I am not faint," said Hester, controlling herself with all the strength of her stubborn will. "I believe," she went on, "you were right, Parkins, in what you said this morning; I want change of air; the least thing startles me. Bring the old woman here, and bring her something to eat—yourself, mind."

Parkins looked inquisitive, but she said nothing, and left the room.

Hester sank back in her chair.

What was all this? was it her destiny forcing her onward along a new path she had never intended to tread? just as long-crushed-back feelings seemed striving to lift their bruised heads and put forth fresh shoots of hope and love, to have this witness of all her early days and feelings for her husband thrust upon her; for she knew how closely the old woman had watched her in the first

days of her acquaintance with Hallam; and in Lucy's absence at the time of her father's death, and of Hallam's frequent visits to Kirton's Farm, Biz had been her only confidant.

Before the estrangement between herself and her husband, when she still cherished the vain hope that Kirton's Farm would be their future home, she had often written to the old servant; but when Lucy's silence had made her shrink from exposing her unhappiness to one who no longer cared for her, she had determined to efface as far as possible all former recollections from her mind, and contented herself with sending Biz her quarterly remittance with a mere formal paper, to which the old woman was to affix her mark.

She could not imagine what had brought her to Uplands.

When Parkins reappeared, before Hester spoke to her visitor, she desired that she might not be disturbed for the next three hours—even by Mr. Hallam.

Biz, wonderfully smartened up externally since we saw her at Kirton's Farm, stood looking at her in open-mouthed surprise.

"You hardly know me, I see," said Hester,

smiling and holding out her hand; "but I don't find you much changed, Elizabeth."

"Call me Biz, Muss Heaster, if it be yeself as is growed so fine and stately. Ere-a-mussy, the first look I ketched on ye, I thought 'twur the queen sheself a-looking so tall and so grand; and how do 'ee find yeself, muss, now ye've growed so great? It be a long bit since I seed ye. Ye looks a bit pale though."

Not a shade more of reverence than in the old kitchen at Kirton's Farm. Biz was hungry, and therefore querulous after her long journey, moreover, she considered that she ought to have been asked to Uplands long ago.

"I am not quite so well as usual, and my little boy has just recovered from a serious illness. You shall see him presently."

"Well, I be a bit curious to see he, sure enough; but it bain't he as I be comed all this way to see; it's your muster, Muss Heaster. Him and I wnr allus good friends, ye mind."

The words grated. It was so long since she had deferred, even in thought, to her husband, that she coloured with anger at the old woman's words.

"You had better have something to eat."

But Biz went on.

"I'll just tell 'ee a bit that's in my mind fust. There wur a meddlesome old body in Stedding last week, or I baint sure I 'ood a comed; but I says to her I wanted to see your muster, and she tells me I mustn't think o' such a thing as going to Uplands, and that it 'ood be resumpshus, she says."

"Who did you say?" asked Hester. It was a deep mortification to think that perhaps Biz had told the history of her first acquaintance with her husband to Martha Hallam—far worse that his family should know how she had loved him than that they should become acquainted with her early poverty and rough ways, although she also shrank from that as a sort of disgrace now.

"Why, she said she wur yer muster's aunt, Muss Heaster. I was comin' along street, and who should I see but Madam Ainsworth, the parson's lady, and a tall sart a scrag of a may-pole wi' her, and she says, 'Here's some one, Mrs. Black, as knows yer niece,' and the other tossed up her head, for all the world like a fidgety horse when the flies settle on him, and

says she, 'I am the aunt of Mr. Hallam.' Ye'd ha' thought that she meant the Sultan o' Chinees or the Pope o' Rome to see the way she had. So I says, 'Oh, be you, ma'am? then it's like enough you can tell I where he bides just now.' 'At Uplands, of course,' she says, and she looked as if she thought I'd no call to ask questions. But you know as well as I, Muss Heaster, it bean't the cock as crows the loudest as has the longest spurs, or the best dung-hill to scratch at, so, says I, for I knew she was nou't but a stranger, so she'd no rights nor titles over I in Stedding, says I, 'Is Muster Hallam to be found at Uplands easy like?' This seemed to set she over; she hustled and rustled sheself about like a peacock spreading out his tail i' the sun, and she says, 'I'm sure I can't say, my good 'ooman; it's no business o' yourn, nor mine neather, that I can see,' and off she went. Now, you see, Muss Heaster, as I said afore, I bean't coomed to see you—ye've never asked I so to do," and the old ill-used look Hester so well remembered came back like a heavy cloud, "but I coomed to see that handsome-faced young gentleman as used always to have a kind word for I in them

ould times at Kirton's Farm. I've got pettickler business to speak to he about."

Hester smiled at Biz's story, but, oh, how her voice and words brought the old days back!

"Well, you shall see him presently." She wondered in her own mind what this business could be that had induced Biz to incur such a fatigue and expense. "Now, Biz, you must eat something."

A hearty meal, and a glass of wine, did wonders. Biz at last softened, and even said Hester had grown "a finer creetur" than she ever expected. She fully confirmed Miss Hallam's account of Lucy's happiness.

"Ere-a-mussy, Muss Heaster, — ye see, it'll allus be Muss Hester, I be too old to change ways—thay two be like a pair o' lovers, they be," said the old woman. "It's too sunshiny though to last, I say. I don't hold wi' a man being allus petted and humoured up in all his ways till he thinks hisself the cock o' the yard; not I: he'd maybe think twice as good of she if she wur harder to please."

"But isn't he kind to her, then?" said Hester, with a sort of lingering hope that the bitter drop

night be the same in all married life, although differently developed.

“Kind! why didn’t I tell ’ee thay wur a pair o’ lovers? What I means is, that husbands and wives should foller the reg’lar rule. Thay wur never meant, at least none as I’ve seen, to live in peace and quietness. Your father and mother didn’t, I can tell ’ee, Muss Heaster, and she was a good sort o’ wife, and yet he was allus having words about summat or other. I wonder how it is wi’ you and your muster?” she said, looking hard at her, as Hester’s colour rose. “Ere-a-mussy! how fond you used to be o’ he, and how, when you ’spected he down, you used to walk to and fro, to and fro along the lane till he coomed in sight. I be bound now,” she added, “you’ve tired on he a’ready, and it’s a shame, muss, if so you be, for he’s a real gentleman wi’ his heart i’ the right place. That sweet smile o’ his’n did me allus good to see.”

And then, to Hester’s great surprise, she told the purport of her visit. In addition to the annual sum of thirty pounds a year which she received from Hester, Mr. Ainsworth had lately called on her and paid her ten pounds, which he

said she would receive half-yearly from Mr. Hallam during his lifetime. She was not to take any notice of this to her neighbours, as Mr. Hallam did not want a fuss made about it; but Biz could not write, and she thought the pretext of thanking Mr. Hallam for his kindness, and making sure it was to continue, would enable her to carry out the plan she had so long cherished of visiting Uplands. It had been a sore trial to her pride to be always obliged to profess — when asked questions by former gossips — that she knew nothing about “Miss Heaster” since her marriage. Her anger at Hester’s long silence had greatly overcome any affection she felt for her; but now that she saw how queen-like she looked, and what a grand place it was, it seemed to increase her own importance that she had once been Mrs. Hallam’s only servant.

Hester could not believe she heard aright. After making Biz repeat her story word for word, she rang the bell impetuously; she would not stop an instant for thought, she must see her husband at once.

She was surprised to find how time had slipped

since the old woman's arrival; even if she had borne the fatigue, Biz could not return Stedding till next morning.

In answer to her mistress's inquiries, Parkins told that Mr. Crathie had driven over, and had taken Mr. Hallam away with him, and that he told he should probably not return for a day or two.

He had asked for Mrs. Hallam, but Parkins told him she was not to be disturbed.

CHAPTER IX.

HOPE.

HESTER's love for her husband was not then so dead as she imagined; she stood almost overpowered at the keen disappointment of finding that she could not at once thank him for his thoughtful kindness to her old servant; nothing he could have done would have touched her as this did. She was unable to detect any double motive in it, and her heart swelled with pride as she thought of the change that must have taken place in her husband.

He must love her, or he would not have done this; and if he did, ought she not to try to love him? but even if she did, would he believe her now? She had repelled him too often; she could not humble herself to risk a like repulse.

Feeling, emotion, passion, all seemed set free and struggling together in her heart and brain.

She scarcely listened to the old woman's delighted remarks on Ralphie when she took her to his nursery.

"The young muster favours 'ee most, Muss Heaster; he's yur eyes as like as like; not but what his father's face 'ood ha' shown uncommon well in a child, with his blue eyes and fresh cheeks. Is Muster Hallam as likely looking as he wur yon time he coomed to Kirton's Farm?"

How vividly the words brought him back before her; that evening when he had met her and Lucy in "the copse bit," when she had almost worshipped him and thought him made of different clay to any human being she had ever seen before—could such a feeling ever return? No; it was but the illusion of extreme youth and ignorance, and she sighed deeply.

"Ere-a-mussy, Muss Heaster! what can 'ee have to sigh for, I'd like to know? ye as has got all 'ee wants without the asking, and 'll this fine place be the young muster's after you," she said, turning from the sleepy child, for he had just been put to bed as they entered, and looking out over the park.

"No," said Hester, slowly, as if struck by a sudden thought, "unless we purchase it; we only rent it now."

"Ere-a-mussy ! more's the pity," said Biz ; but Hester made no answer.

She took the old woman back to her study, and went again and looked at Ralphie. He was in a sound healthy sleep already.

She sent the nurse into the next room, and sat down to think.

Did she wish, or did she not wish for a reconciliation with her husband ?

Yes, she did wish it. In the first place it would be much better for Ralphie if his parents were of one mind. She did not expect, she dared not hope, they should ever be united in heart and affections, as Lucy and her husband were ; the time for that had gone by ; but she seemed suddenly to feel that she had nourished her resentment quite long enough, and that the time had come for showing her willingness to forget and forgive the past. She did not consider that she had anything to ask pardon for ; her only difficulty was, how the reconciliation—she would not yet own to herself how she longed for it—was to be accomplished, without

an awkwardness which might make matters worse.

But Biz's question about Uplands had fired a new train of thought, impulse rather, which she felt constrained to act upon.

Why not purchase Uplands at once?—she knew how Fred longed for it—and present it to him as the first step towards a better life.

It was rare for Hester to take a sudden resolve; but this evening she seemed strangely carried out of herself. She looked at her boy, he seemed to smile in his sleep, as if approving her thought. She paused for some time longer, and then rang the nursery bell.

“Parkins, let old Mrs. Black sleep in the next room, and tell Françoise to be ready to start with me by the nine o'clock train to London to-morrow. Master Ralph seems so well that I think I can trust him to you, especially as Mrs. Hallam is here. I shall return in the evening, if possible; if not, early next day.”

Parkins looked electrified; but she knew her lady too well by this time to remonstrate; she took her revenge by ridiculing the transports of the French maid, who, after several months'

confinement in what she called *cette campagne ennuyeuse*, rejoiced she was at last to accompany her mistress to London.

Mrs. Hallam received Hester's announcement with quiet displeasure. She had been left to herself all day far more than she considered right. Hester had just appeared for dinner-time, and had then returned to her room.

"Surely, Hester, you will not go to London without consulting your husband."

"I shall be home again before he is. I am going on business which cannot be delayed."

"Did Frederic know you were going?"

"No."

"I am really afraid he will think it very strange; however, I suppose you think you know best."

"I am sure I do." Hester resolutely took up a book as if to forbid further discussion; and her mother-in-law, feeling extremely ill-used and discontented, was afraid to urge her further.

Early next morning the same carriage took her and old Biz to the station, as there was a train going to Stedding soon after the London train's departure.

Hester had almost resolved to send an affectionate message to Lucy; but then she had sent none to her. Biz had not told any one where she was going, for fear of being stopped. She did not tell her young mistress this, now that she had been favourably received by her.

If Hester had not been so pre-occupied, she might have wondered how Biz enjoyed the novel luxury of driving in a real carriage; but whatever the old woman felt, she was not going to betray any surprise or admiration; to recur to by-gones now would have lessened her own importance and Hester's.

Only when they were parting, she said,—

“Do ye reckon ever to see th'ould place again, Muss Heaster?”

“I don't know—I can't tell,” said Hester, for she felt that she was on the verge of an enterprise which might change all the tenor of her future; “but, Biz, if I go near Stedding, I will manage to see you—now good-by'e. I'm very glad I have seen you. I will tell Mr. Hallam you came to thank him.”

Biz looked after her as the train glided out of sight. She admired her greatly, and could

hardly believe her the same being whom she used to scold so freely in former times, for tearing holes in her gingham frocks; but somehow the fractious spirit of the old woman, always seeking for invisible wounds and scratches, felt aggrieved by the irresistible awe she felt in Hester's presence.

"She might ha' bid a body bide till she coomed back; maybe she wur feared I'd be telling o' the Farm ways and such like, but she might ha' knowed I better; there be plenty to let 'ee down a peg, without setting yer own hand to the work."

As every station brought Hester nearer to London, she felt happier and lighter-hearted. A thrill of youthful impatience, long unknown, ran through her veins; her face had lost its habitually stern, self-controlled expression; she looked agitated, and yet more at peace with herself than she had done for some time past. And sundry terrors, common to weak woman-kind, but utterly foreign to her masculine temperament, now, as she drew near her journey's end, flitted through her mind. Suppose Mr. Goldsmith should be away, and that she should

have to return to Uplands with her purpose unfulfilled; her determined will rose against such a delay to her impatience; he must be summoned back, let him be where he might. Something told her that nothing less than her own personal influence would decide him to so large a disbursement as the purchase-money of Uplands, and yet, looking at it in every way, it seemed to Hester that it was the wisest course to pursue. With her present feelings towards her husband, her property would surely be as safe in his hands as in those of a lawyer; and if she made Uplands his own, self-interest would urge him to improve the estate in every way. The next instant she blamed herself for the half doubt the last suggestion implied; and setting her foot firmly on the hound-like suspicions which had been so used to fosterage, that they would scarcely be kept at a distance, she resolved to trust fully or not at all.

Most young women would probably have shrunk with timidity at the noise and bustle of a great London station, where there was no one to meet them, or to care for them; but Hester was fearless, and had unlimited confidence in the power of money. She did not leave anything to Françoise,

but, beckoning a porter, and slipping something in his hand, was soon installed in a cab with her, and on the way to the hotel they had stayed at, the last time they were in London.

Here she deposited Françoise, and then drove on to Mr. Goldsmith's office.

She was indignant with herself for being so uncollected and impatient; but try as she would, she could not refrain from imagining her husband's surprise and pleasure, when she told him what she had done; for she did not feel now as if she could wait as she had at first intended, till the title-deeds were engrossed. Lawyers were always so long and troublesome in all they had to do.

It surprised her to hear that Mr. Goldsmith was at home and disengaged. Accustomed to anticipate evil, it seemed as if all were going too smoothly for a good result to arise.

She shrank from seeing him; but for her unbounded confidence in her father's discernment, and her distrust of her husband, she would long ago have wished her affairs freed from his control.

She followed the clerk so closely that she entered as her name was announced. The lawyer

started rather than rose from his chair, his pale face turning yellow and then almost leaden from surprise at the sight of his visitor. He looked behind him rapidly, first over one shoulder, then over the other, and finally burst into one of his fits of silent laughter.

“You must excuse me, my dear young lady, indeed, you must; but—bless my soul,” and he surveyed her with evident admiration, “I didn’t expect a visit from so charming a lady.”—She looked impatient, and no wonder; there are some men by whom it is not pleasant to women to be admired, although probably from long habit in the misuse of their eyes, they are all unconscious of giving offence, and the lawyer was one of these. —“I hope Mr. Hallam is well; is he in town?”

“No, I came up alone, to see you on a business matter.”

“Ha, ha,” he again laughed, for some time, taking refuge behind his pocket-handkerchief; “but why did you take the trouble, my dear lady? had you sent me a line I would have run down to Uplands with all the pleasure in life.”

“That would not have served my purpose; I have private business with you, and I have no

wish at present that Mr. Hallam should know anything about it."

The lawyer's face lengthened, and his flaccid double-chin waggled mournfully as he shook his head.

"Dear, dear, I regret extremely," he said, "I had hoped——" and then he buried his face in his handkerchief, managing, however, to watch Hester's face as he did so.

She looked haughty and displeased.

"There is no cause for regret, Mr. Goldsmith; I simply wish to make my husband a present, and don't want him to know it beforehand, that is all."

Goldsmith's face twitched, and he again looked nervously over each shoulder, but he did not interrupt her; he seemed afraid of making another false move.

"We like Uplands so very much, and our friend Mr. Crathie, who constantly hears from Sir Rupert Joy, says he still is willing to sell it; therefore I shall be very glad if you will at once communicate with his agent and purchase it for us, as our present term of it has nearly expired."

The lawyer's face had grown paler and paler as she proceeded, and he now looked almost *ghastly*.

As a refuge from her inquiring glance, he buried his face this time completely in his handkerchief, and at last wiped his eyes solemnly, and cleared his throat in a husky manner.

"How soon can it all be done, Mr. Goldsmith?" She was not pleased with his manner, but she imagined he was thinking her proposal over. "I wish to let my husband know the purchase is in progress when I return."

"Never, madam, if my advice is to be taken—never." He rose as he spoke, and struck the table with his hand emphatically.

Hester thought him extremely absurd; she had expected some opposition, but this was too much; he had listened to her suggestions when she was younger and less experienced—he should not thwart her now; if he thought to frighten her by a theatrical manner, he was mistaken.

So with far more dignity than he had ever seen in her, she said,—

"I did not take this journey to argue the matter, Mr. Goldsmith, but only to ask you to

make the purchase, and I wish you to be as speedy as may suit with your convenience."

Goldsmith had watched her closely while she spoke, and there seemed to be a slightly vindictive expression in his eyes as her lips curled with her last words.

But only for an instant, even if it had been in his face at all. The next moment he had clasped his hands entreatingly, and was standing before her.

"My dear young lady—I may say, my dear child, for I have known you from your earliest years—if you are at present, so far as seeming goes, living peacefully and happily with your husband, spare yourself, spare him the misery, spare your infant child, the ruin the purchase of Uplands would entail."

"I do not understand you, Mr. Goldsmith," said Hester, now thoroughly angry, "nor what you mean by these allusions. If years ago it was my misfortune to be obliged to speak openly to you of my husband's errors, your own good feeling should, now that his life is entirely changed, keep you silent on what has gone before."

Mr. Goldsmith shook his head with the deepest commiseration, and almost wrung his hands still clasped together.

“Do not drive me to extremes,” he said, at last. “For your dead father’s sake, let this matter rest; your property is safe, at present, do not expose it to the risk of being gambled away.—There—there, I have said too much, but you cannot fail of understanding me now.”

Hester had turned deadly white as his meaning reached her. For an instant she felt as if sense and sight were both going, and she grasped eagerly at the table beside which she sate, for support; but when Goldsmith advanced still closer with expressions of regret, the intense dislike she had felt for him ever since he told her the true story of her marriage, brought strength. He should not see that he had the power of giving pain, but in that moment how keenly she wished she had listened to her husband’s request, that she would withdraw her confidence from Goldsmith. She had refused, partly from respect to her father’s memory, and partly because, as she considered Frederic wrong and ill-judged in other things, he must be so in this.

"Do you know what you are saying?" She sat stiffly upright in her chair, and spoke very sternly.

"Too well, too well, my poor child; but you are treating me as if I were an enemy, whereas God knows I am your best and only friend in this. I would save you from ruin; above all, I would save your innocent child from the consequences of that ruin which must be imminent, if you purchase Uplands."

She looked at him as if she would find out truth, deeply as he might hide it from her; but now he did not flinch or change colour under the searching scrutiny.

"You knew what you were saying, sir; do you know what you are doing?—Stop, I will tell you. You are trying to destroy a man's fair fame, his truth and his honesty, by which he has won back a wife's trust and esteem." Even now she would not say love, and Goldsmith noticed it. "But you scarcely know me yet. Dare to utter anything against my husband which you cannot prove, and you shall be punished for calumny by the law of the land. Do not shelter yourself under the hope that I or my husband shall shrink

from any exposure, however open ; he should not if he would."

One of her old tempests of passion swayed Hester now. She had risen to her feet, and with flashing eyes, quivering nostrils, and flushed cheeks, looked as Goldsmith had rarely seen a woman look before. But she did not frighten him ; he seemed rather to think it a piece of consummate acting, far more pleasing than her calm, scornful, suspicious mood.

"What a pity so fine a creature should be so thrown away," he said to himself. To Hester he made no immediate answer ; he understood her quite well enough to be sure that, left to herself, she would feel shame for such ungovernable passion. He walked up and down the office, with his eyes bent on the ground, and one hand grasping his chin. And when he turned to where she still stood in profound silence now, he smiled kindly.

"I am used to deal with human emotion, Mrs. Hallam, and I can quite understand yours ; it is justifiable and natural, and I should not have thought well of you, had you shown less. Your only error has been—and it is, of course, one on the right side—in allowing a fair seeming to

blind you so completely to what has really been going on." She did not attempt to interrupt him now, and stood with her lips firmly pressed together, listening, but with downcast eyes. "Still not one word more shall pass my lips if you are disposed either to doubt me, or to wish matters to remain as they are."

As we have seen, Hester's early education had not been likely to impress her with any of the sacred reverence which should fence in a husband from his wife's suspicions. They had gone to church, and there the religion of their marriage, and her regard for its sacramental virtue, had ended. Her respect for him at first had arisen from his outward superiority, and the halo with which young love always surrounds the object of its worship; but when this golden mist faded, and revealed the flaws in the idol it had enshrouded, she thought herself permitted to judge her husband as she would have done any other offender. He had forfeited every right to her obedience, and although he had understood her quite well enough to refrain from asserting his authority, she would not have obeyed it, if he had. He was a man, and she a woman, and they had each a

right to govern themselves ; therefore, none of the scruples which might have troubled a dutiful wife who looked upon her husband as her lord, set by God in authority over her, troubled Hester now ; only she paused a moment, with the caution habitual to her when not over-excited, before she answered,—

“ If you can prove that my husband lives knowingly beyond his income, I will listen to you.”

“ I can prove far more than this,” said Goldsmith ; he seemed excited as he spoke, possibly from the doubt implied in her answer ; “ do you remember the large amount you empowered me to make away with out of your capital, to settle his debts when you came of age.”

She bowed her head.

“ Nearly at the same time, as you doubtless remember, Mr. Hallam came into possession of his father’s legacy, which, at your request, I also freed from the claims he had allowed to accumulate upon it ; and a certain income has been also paid ever since to you each, separately, out of the residue of your shattered property—you best know how regular and correct those payments

have been—judge, then, of my surprise and grief when your husband applied to me to pay gambling debts almost equalling those cancelled.”

He watched her eagerly as he spoke.

Hester shuddered with doubt and fear, but her suspicious curiosity was now too fully roused to allow her to hesitate. She only sate down again as if to show she was a patient listener.

“At first I thought of applying to you, that you might use your influence to save him, but then I could not tell how it might be between you; you might be cognizant of all, and greatly resent my interference—and I lent the money.”

“Where is its acknowledgment?” said Hester, faintly. She felt so deadly sick and cold as the lawyer went on now in a quiet compassionating voice, that she feared each moment to lose consciousness.

“Patience, my dear child, I am coming to that. I advanced this one sum, and received your husband’s receipt for it. To my great surprise, he called on me a short time ago—do you remember his coming to town, about the Ascot week, I

think?" She bowed her head. "He called then and repaid the money."

"But he was not at Ascot; he went up to see his mother."

"So he told me," said Goldsmith, gravely; "but, my dear young lady, your former experience, when we went through that sad business together, might have convinced you that betting and gambling can go on anywhere. I have told you the plain facts, and leave you to judge; but, perhaps," he added, suddenly, as a new idea seemed to strike him, "you know how he came by the money as well as I do."

A tap at the door stopped her answer, and gave her time to think. Why should she take his word in this way, plausible as things might seem.

A clerk entered, whom Mr. Goldsmith sent away after a few hurried words.

"I know nothing," she said; "I had every reason to suppose my husband not in debt," and she thought of his present to Biz; but now it seemed to take another shape; perhaps he had sent it as hush money to his conscience, for she had consented to remain with him as his wife solely on the agreement that he would give up all

gambling; "but, Mr. Goldsmith, you said you would give me proofs. I do not doubt your word, but I think I ought to have decided proof."

He had watched her eagerly while she spoke, and his face turned a shade yellower as she said the last words.

"You might trust your father's old friend, certainly, without farther question; but, as a man of business, I cannot blame you for not doing so. Worldly wisdom is a sign of early development of the reasoning powers in a woman, and circumstanced as you are, and are likely to continue, you need it more than any one I know. For proofs I can satisfy you doubly. First, do you remember Captain Fortescue? I think you saw him often when you were first married?"—

She merely bowed. Any allusion to that sad time made her anxious and doubtful; besides, her interest was too breathless now to interrupt him.

"Unfortunately, he is somewhere in France; but I daresay I could learn where, if you wished it. He will confirm, in every particular, what I have told you; for he knew everything, although he is bound, in honour, not to speak; he told me he dared not visit at Uplands, for he

feared your scrutiny."—Her heart sank now, despairingly. How many invitations Fortescue had refused.—“But, my dear Mrs. Hallam, I can offer you other proofs. I do not believe in your husband’s Ascot success. I have discovered since that his repayment to me was simply a blind, because, I suppose, I remonstrated on his broken faith towards you, and led him to fear I might write to you on the subject; he has put himself into the hands of one of the most notorious money-lenders in London, to whom he already owes large sums.”

“Tell me the man’s name; I will go there at once.”

“Stay a bit. This man is a harpy, and claims usurious and unlawful interest; if you mix yourself up in the matter, and let him see your deep interest, your property is as certainly ruined as if you purchased Uplands, which would soon be in his hands. Your only way to deal with a man of this kind is to show yourself indifferent, and to let him suppose there is nothing to be expected from you; in that case he will squeeze your husband as dry as he can, and then if he finds we are determined he will probably compromise. But

the question now is, how you will act with regard to Mr. Hallam."

Hester started shuddering. She sate for a few moments still and silent.

"I must have time to think, Mr. Goldsmith. What did you say was the name of the money-lender?"

He told her, and seeing her still lost in thought, added, as if stung by her want of confidence,—

"If you can remain in town long enough, I could, no doubt, procure you your husband's signatures; but, of course, if suspicion is to be avoided, this cannot be done hastily.

But Hester turned from the proposal.

"I do not know why I should doubt you," she said, sadly; "but still, swear to me solemnly, Mr. Goldsmith, that you have told me the truth, and that your motive in doing so has been for my good, and I will rest satisfied."

Outwardly she was calm, but she knew by that very stillness how much misery his next words might bring.

She looked earnestly at him; he trembled visibly, but it seemed to be with emotion, and stood silent.

Suddenly he caught her hand.

“Bless you, my dear child, for relieving an old man’s heart; you do not know, you cannot tell how cruel it is to be doubted when you have done all in your power to serve. If it be any comfort to you in your sorrow, most solemnly do I swear to all I have this day told you, and that it has been to spare you misery—and now,” he said, in a less constrained voice, “be guided by me—do not settle these claims at once.”

“I have no intention of doing so,” she said, dreamily; “I am not likely to see much of Mr. Hallam for the future;” and then she stood still, pressing her hands together as though she would break them; presently she drew a deep breath.

“I wish especially to know where Captain Fortescue is to be found. In the mean time I suppose I need scarcely ask you to maintain the strictest silence about what has come to my knowledge. I should not wish my visit here to transpire for at least a fortnight.”

“It shall never be mentioned, my dear lady, unless you desire it; as soon as I learn where Captain Fortescue is, I will forward his address to you.”

She rose slowly, pulled down her veil, and prepared to leave the office without speaking.

He held out his hand ; she allowed him to take hers for an instant, but it was lifeless in his grasp, and quickly withdrawn, and without another word, except to bid him tell the cab-driver to take her whence she came, they parted.

Goldsmith stood looking after her, at first smiling—but only for an instant : then the perplexed, troubled expression returned.

CHAPTER X.

HESTER'S RESOLVE.

It was pouring with rain that evening when Frederic Hallam returned to Uplands. He went straight to the nursery, where Ralphie gave him a far warmer greeting than usual: he had been so accustomed to his father's constant presence lately that he scarcely knew how to spare him.

"Where's mamma, Ralphie?" He looked round, as if expecting to find Hester watching beside her boy.

"Mamma all gone," said Ralphie, gravely; "Ralphie all alone."

Hallam looked at Parkins for an explanation, she told him her mistress had gone to town on business, and would probably not return till the following day; she said nothing about the old woman—it might be some private business or

charity of Mrs. Hallam's. Parkins knew better than any one that this young husband and wife had never been one in confidence or pursuits, and she thought it safest only to repeat what she had been told to say.

Hallam felt chilled and pained. He had made up his mind during the drive home that his mother would soon leave them: he had heard her say she was going to Switzerland with the Fletchers early in the following week; he and Hester would be alone then, and that should be the beginning of their new life.

He had not felt so happy for a long time. His heart beat like a lover's; and husband though he was, some of a lover's uncertainty had lingered in it as he rode up the avenue, and springing from the saddle, entered through the stable-yard, impatient to seek Hester.

Gone to London! What could she have gone for? It was so extraordinary to leave home in his absence in this sudden way.

He played with Ralphie for a few minutes, and then disregarding, for the first time, his earnest request to "stop a little longer," he wished him good-night, and went to the drawing-room.

Mrs. Hallam lay gracefully on a sofa, with her handkerchief to her eyes.

He went up to her, and asked what was the matter.

She wiped her eyes softly, and, raising herself a little, looked at him and shook her head.

"My dear Fred, I am grieving for you, not myself."

"Why, what's the matter now?" he said, laughing in his old, cheerful way; but he felt sure that something unpleasant was coming.

His mother sate upright now, and looked at him with a sorrowful expression.

"My dear Frederic, will you sit down and listen to me? I have something very special to say."

He sat down unwillingly. Ever since his marriage he detested these requests, which had hitherto resulted in complaints of Hester, and just now it struck him that, in his surprise and anxiety to learn particulars of his wife's journey, he had kept on his wet clothes—for he had ridden home through the rain—and was shivering.

"Well," he said, before his mother could speak, "I am rather in a hurry; but how about Hester's

journey—do you know anything about it? Did she leave a message with you?”

“There, that’s exactly what I mean; and then you ask, ‘what’s the matter?’ It is enough to try any mother with heart or feeling, my poor boy, to see you set at nought in this way, and neglected before your own servants.”

Frederic Hallam bit his lips, and pulled his whiskers nervously. He did not think Hester had acted rightly, but then he greatly wished his mother would mind her own business.

“Did Hester leave a message?” he said, abruptly.

“Oh, no; and when I remonstrated and said I did not think you would like it, she was so contemptuous and haughty, that really one would imagine she does not feel herself accountable to you or to any one for what she does. It is not right, indeed it is not, Frederic, for a handsome young woman to be going off to London, with only a maid servant, directly her husband’s back is turned. If a woman once gets talked about, it’s all over with her in country society, as you will find.”

“My dear mother, you are mixing things up together,” he said, still trying to laugh it off;

"just now I thought you were anxious for my sake, and now it seems to be for Hester."

He got up and walked to the window, as if to show he was tired of the subject.

His mother's tears were really flowing now. Some women have an ever-present power of crying—and of crying prettily, too—without the ugly sobs, and swollen eyes, and mouth distortions which make a tearful woman detestable. She followed him to the window, and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"My dear boy," she said, soothingly, "you cannot suppose I am blind. I love you far too dearly not to see that you have given your affections to a woman who does not love you in return."—

"Mother," he interrupted, hoarsely, "I cannot suffer this."

But she would go on. In such a matter she was sure to triumph.

"I will not dwell on this part of the subject, Frederic; if she is so wilfully blind to her own happiness, it is not in my power to open her eyes; but you have no right to suffer her to take your place, and to rule you completely."

He did not answer her at once, he was so

thoroughly vexed; and, although his mother's unkind neglect of Hester when they were in London had greatly weakened his love for her, still she was his mother, and had a right to his forbearance.

"The old saying, 'it is ill meddling betwixt husband and wife,' holds good still, I suppose," he said, "my dear mother." She had turned away as he spoke. "I love you too well to discuss this subject: we must agree to differ about it privately."

"Then you really mean to let things remain as they are?"

"I really had rather not talk on the subject at all," he said, wearily, but still maintaining his self-command.

"Very well; then don't blame me or think me unkind if I say I would rather leave before Hester's return. I know that my staying or going is perfectly indifferent to her; in fact, she thinks only of herself and——"

"Mother," said Hallam, with more indignation in his tone than his mother had heard for years; "you say that, when you saw her in Ralphie's illness——"

“Ah me! I see I might as well talk to the wind.”

She was thoroughly put out; good tempered as she usually was, she liked her dignity to be respected, and much as she worshipped her wealth, she disliked her daughter-in-law's superiority; perhaps there is no offence so great in a silly woman's eyes as that of unmistakably superior talent in one whom, in some other ways, she considers scarcely her equal. Mrs. Hallam did not know before how great her dislike was. As she felt at present, she would gladly have separated Fred from his wife for ever; and her sense of her own importance led her to think that he might in time be influenced by her marked disapprobation of the way in which things now existed.

Her son only said,—

“I should be very glad if the subject were ended,” and then, scarcely pausing for a reply, he went to his dressing-room.

But he did not change his damp clothes at once. His mother had told him unpleasant truths, but they had been truths for all that.

Still, if his hopes were realized, all would be right; but he would not explain to his mother

the reason of Hester's changed manner; or of the consciousness of wrong-doing which caused him to bear it, however unwillingly. He had never confided the secret of his marriage to any one but Goldsmith and Fortescue, and it need never be known now. He smiled sadly to himself at his mother's urgency about Hester's want of love; in former times, when she had planned many and many a match for him, love or mutual happiness had never been mentioned in her calculations.

He was sorry she should leave Uplands with angry feelings; but it was better she should go. Frederic Hallam had none of the misjudged notions of dove-tailing one person's disposition into another's, that make so much mischief in families; if people could not agree, he thought they were better apart, and he had quite given up the idea that Hester and his mother could ever sympathize.

And in some ways it would be a relief to him now to be spared a witness of his meeting with his wife, for he was really angry with her. Hitherto, her contemptuous words had been uttered when they were alone; she had never publicly set him at naught; their habit of out-

ward self-control, which had probably hindered their reconciliation, helped the fair seeming of their life; but this was a decided step taken without his sanction or approval.

He thought deliberately over the events of yesterday. He remembered for the first time that as he went towards her room to bid Hester good-bye—for his intention was to sleep at Mr. Crathie's—(his wife would have deemed leave-taking very absurd and superfluous, if he had been only going away for a short time)—he met Parkins, who told him her mistress had asked not to be disturbed, even by him, for at least three hours.

It had been so usual for Hester to shut herself up when engaged in deep study, and to be exceedingly annoyed when disturbed, that although he felt disappointed, he had not been surprised; but now it appeared to him that he had been wrong, and that he ought to have entered the study. What right had a wife to shut herself up from her husband? His mother said truly, he had been too weak and yielding in all these things; but, then, if Love returned, would they not right themselves? Surely, then, Hester would seek him instead of shunning him.

He walked across the gallery to the nursery, and called to Parkins.

"When did you say your mistress would return?" he said, carelessly.

"To-night, sir, or to-morrow morning."

"She took some one with her besides Françoise?"

He asked it as a question, but Parkins understood him to be asserting his knowledge of Biz's presence.

"Yes, sir, old Mrs. Black."

Hallam turned round and looked hard at her.

"Whom did you say?" he said, closing the nursery door, as if unwilling that any one but himself should hear her answer.

"Old Mrs. Black, sir." Parkins felt rather alarmed by his earnest manner. "An old person who came to see mistress yesterday morning, and slept here, and went away with her to-day."

He only remembered the old servant under the name of Biz; he had quite forgotten her surname.

"What sort of a looking person, Parkins? You did not mention her before."

"Didn't I, sir? Well, perhaps not. I don't

know that any one but me hardly knew about her being here. I'm sure Mrs. Hallam didn't, for she had a bad headache, and didn't get up to breakfast, and I waited on her myself, for her maid has been away for a two days' holiday, and has only just come home."

Hallam had time to recover himself during this speech, but Parkins, who seemed anxious to change the subject, suddenly exclaimed,—

"Why, sir, you've never changed your things after all, and you're as white as death: shall I come and set light to the fire in your dressing-room?"

"No; oh, no." He wished to be alone, and, spite of Parkins' repeated injunctions, for, like all the other servants, she dearly loved her master, he was some time yet before he took off his wet clothes.

Who could this old woman be, to take Hester from her home in this sudden way? He did not choose to ask any more questions; he wished he had not seen Parkins at all.

However, it was his mother's last evening: he must not let her spend it alone.

Mrs. Hallam remarked how he shivered, and

complained of cold during the evening ; and when he bade her good-night, she told him his lips were burning—he said his head ached—and thinking that he probably took Hester's conduct more to heart than he chose to admit, she took no further notice.

He accompanied Mrs. Hallam to the railway station early next morning, and then drove to see a farmer at some distance, whose stock Mr. Crathie had mentioned in terms of high praise the day before. The weather was cold and showery for the time of year ; but he was restless, and felt that he must fill up the time with active occupation till his wife's return. It was luncheon time when he again reached Uplands.

Hester returned home that morning. To Françoise's infinite disgust, she travelled by the very earliest train, and so only just missed her husband.

It was an inexpressible relief to find him absent and Mrs. Hallam gone ; during her homeward journey, and in the previous time after she left Mr. Goldsmith's office, she had tried to decide on some line of conduct, but nothing would take defined shape ; all plans crumbled away

directly she tried to reflect upon any one of them.

The only idea that stood out from the shrouding blackness of her despair was that she must be freed from her husband's presence—she did not think of divorce or of any settled separation ; all she wanted was to be free from daily companionship, nay, from the sight of one whom she despised, and yet whom she equally despised herself for not hating.

She went mechanically to the nursery and kissed Ralphie ; the child, spite of all her recent care, did not cling to her as he had done to his father ; but Hester was too self-absorbed to notice this.

After awhile she went down-stairs into her study. How hateful that room was to her now ; it seemed as if months had passed by since she had sate there, dreaming of a happy future with the man who now, to her proud sense of honour, had sinned beyond any possibility of forgiveness. It would have been impossible to Hester to break her plighted word ; therefore she had no mercy, no thought that a repenting sinner ought to be more dearly cherished than a just high-minded one who has never been in like manner tempted.

Her eyes fell on a letter, evidently placed to attract her attention. Mrs. Hallam had put it there on the previous day ; it had come enclosed to her in a letter from Martha Hallam, who had received it from Mrs. Bonham.

Hester knew the handwriting ; it was from her aunt Wrenshaw, and its affectionate tone soothed her while she read.

Mrs. Wrenshaw apologised for her long silence ; she said that, not hearing from Hester, she had not liked to trouble her with letters, as the last two or three she had sent had remained unanswered. Hester had never sent to her since her estrangement from her husband ; she said she wrote now, because Lucy had heard from Miss Hallam that Hester had passed very near Arden, last autumn, when she was in France ; perhaps if she had known that her uncle and aunt had been living there for nearly three years, she would have paid them a visit : Mr. Wrenshaw hoped much that Hester and her husband would go and see them the next time they went to France ; they had a nice house, and would do all in their power to make them comfortable.

There was a yearning motherly strain in the

expression of all this that made her long to be a child again, and to lay her head in aunt Wrenshaw's lap and tell her all her sorrow, as she had once done; when as a little girl she was sent to school against her will; the only time in her reserved life that she had really opened her heart to any one; probably, although she did not know it, this was the link that bound her to her aunt Wrenshaw.

As she sat thus thinking—she had done little else for the last day and night—the link grew stronger and stronger, and seemed to be drawing her with mighty, irresistible force to one who she felt loved her.

“The only creature who ever did love me,” she said mentally, and her lips quivered, while her heart felt heavy and swollen with the tears that would not come.

But a defined purpose was shaping itself and she felt for the time relieved from the crushing pressure of her misery.

Long before her husband returned, her resolution was taken.

CHAPTER XI.

HESTER LEAVES UPLANDS.

“WHO was this old woman who came here and went away with you, and why did you go?”

Frederic Hallam said this as soon as luncheon was over, and the servants had withdrawn.

His wife’s constrained, severe greeting had irritated him almost beyond endurance, when he thought her so much to blame.

“The old woman was my old servant, Elizabeth Black; she came here to thank you for your kindness to her; but I would rather not say why I went away. Her visit was quite unconnected with my absence from home.”

“I really think, Hester,” he said, his colour rising at her contemptuous tone, “that you should be more open with me. I don’t acknowledge your right to do these eccentric things.”

"Very likely; but circumstanced as I am, I cannot move exactly in the beaten route that other women tread. But now I want to speak to you," she said, as if quite enough had passed on the subject. "I have a letter from my aunt Mrs. Wrenshaw, asking me to visit her at Arden where she is staying; my health and spirits have been severely tried lately, and in every way I feel that I must have a decided change of scene. Have you any objection against my accepting this invitation?"

There was a pause before he answered.

"Do you intend to travel alone?" For there was a defiance in the tone of her request, that had awakened him to the fact that some strange change had again taken place in his wife.

"With Françoise," and she moved as if about to leave the room.

"I repeat, Hester, that I greatly prefer you should not do these eccentric things. You set people wondering and talking more than you are aware of. It is neither right nor pleasant."

"Very possibly," she answered, without looking at him, and his anger rose almost beyond control.

"I wish, Hester, you would be less sententious.

If you would even fly in a passion, like any other woman, it would be better; then we could come to some sort of explanation; but you are so cold-blooded, you are enough to provoke the quietest fellow going."

She smiled scornfully.

"I might remind you, that in former times you said it was unladylike to lose one's temper; but that would be idle now."

Hallam started up with a violent effort at self-control. He restrained himself, although an irritation he could scarcely master, and which he had never before felt, was gaining hold of him.

"You are ladylike enough for any one, as far as the world goes," he said, abruptly; "but I wish you were more like a woman. What I mean is this: I wish—I ought to say I insist—that you should put off this journey for a month; by that time Ralphie would be strong enough to travel, we could all go together, and all scandal would be avoided."

"You have heard me say that I am above scandal." Her voice still sounded hard and unmoved; his evident wish to accompany her had

not touched her, it had only increased her anxiety to be free.

“But you are not the only person to be considered. Come, Hester, be reasonable.” He walked up to her, and laid his hand on her arm. In that moment the remembrance of his vow made him determine that there should be at least an explanation between them; but his head throbbed and felt confused, he was no match for Hester just then. “I beg of you to put off this journey for a month. I—I don’t want to be left alone.” He said this without looking at her, as if the words had escaped.

She laughed bitterly, and withdrew from his touch.

“Say that it suits you we should travel together. Do not invent any sentiment, it is a mockery now. I tell you, I am not well, and for many reasons I wish to be alone with aunt Wrenshaw. If you prevent me from leaving you at once, I feel that I shall be seriously ill. You know me too well to think me fanciful about my health. There are many things,” she added, in a gentler tone, “which had better be explained between us; but—but——” Her voice

trembled slightly. "I think if we were apart for a while, and wrote fully to each other, it might be good for both."

Her lip quivered as she spoke.

"I think," he said, "that you are mistaken, and that a wife's place is beside her husband. Still, if you really feel that your health requires an immediate change, I will not oppose your wishes; only you must not travel alone with Françoise, but that can be arranged. I wish we might both leave Ralphie. I have been feeling lately, Hester," and spite of her determined coldness, he took her hand in his and pressed it fondly, "that a happier life is dawning for us, and I had hoped," he added proudly, as she withdrew her hand, "that you shared this wish."

"Pray say no more," she said, in an abrupt harsh voice; "write what you will when I am gone; if you urge me now you will make me say what can never be recalled. It is understood, then, that you consent to my leaving Uplands the day after to-morrow."

She left the room without waiting for an answer. If Hallam had followed her then, he might have wondered still more at her conduct;

but he would not have accused her of want of feeling, as he now did.

Locking herself in her bed-chamber, she threw herself on her knees, and hiding her face on the coverlet, burst into passionate weeping.

What was it? Was she bewitched, or what evil influence was over her, that she should so long to believe her husband innocent? She could not be so base so worthless as to love him spite of all. If Goldsmith had not made his revelation, how happy they might have been, for her husband's manner confirmed her belief that he was ready to ask *her* forgiveness, and tell her he had learned to love her. Still she never thought that *he* had anything to forgive, or that it was wonderful that his love had so patiently endured her coldness: self-blame, and self-distrust were feelings still unknown to Hester Hallam. Her own want of self-command surprised her; she had resolved that morning that although for the present she must be freed from her husband's presence, yet that she would not decide her ultimate fate until she had seen Captain Fortescue; then if his account confirmed Goldsmith's; she scarcely knew how she should act. To leave Ralphie in his father's hands entirely, to

be brought up by a man devoid of truth and honour, would be impossible; yet, unless she returned to her husband, she saw no means of retaining any influence over the child; and she shrank from this alternative with tears that flowed from the acknowledgment of her own weakness, more than for sorrow for him and his crime. Could she be, then, so infatuated as to shrink from the influence of this man, who had forfeited for the second time all claim to her good opinion? No, it was impossible; she rose from her knees, and seated herself in a low chair beside the bed. Her tears, rare visitants, violent and stormy as they had been, had calmed her. She persuaded herself that she was not well; that the shock of Goldsmith's revelation had unnerved her will, and clouded her judgment; that away from Uplands she should see things more as they really were—now she must be vigilant against any explanation or reconciliation with her husband before she had seen Fortescue.

The next day passed listlessly for both, each feeling that their estrangement had widened, Hester alone knowing why. Hallam was greatly depressed; he feared that his petulant manner had increased

her dislike ; for there had been something in the way she had shrunk from his touch which deeply wounded him. As we know, it had proceeded from a fear, an inward shrinking from what she had at this moment felt to be an irresistible influence ; but she could not have sought out, if she had tried to do so, a more effectual barrier against her husband's affection.

Once again, when next morning she bade farewell to little Ralphie, her courage nearly failed her.

"Mamma not go away again," he said, in his sweet plaintive voice ; "mamma come back soon to Ralphie."

But she heard her husband's step in the gallery, and resolutely forced back her tears : she so dreaded lest he should take advantage of any appearance of weakness.

When they reached the hall—he had followed her silently down-stairs—he said,—

"Hester, come in here a moment," and led the way into the library.

She could not refuse him then, for all the servants were grouped round, ready to see her depart.

"I am going with you to the station, Hester," he said, very gravely ; "but it will be too late

then. If you knew how ill I feel, I think you would put off this journey even now."

He looked earnestly at her.

She was cold and impassive. She could not bear men to complain of illness, and she thought this might, after all, be but a subterfuge to prevent her going.

He went on rapidly, his cheeks flushing while he spoke.

"I am not able to say all I wish. I should, probably, only arouse your scorn and anger, and I wish to part kindly with you; but—Hester, if you would have stayed with me now, we might have gone on more happily afterwards."

He did not take her hand, or throw his arm round her; but there was a manly earnestness of love in his face and voice, before which her pride melted. He had not asked her pardon, but yet for the moment Love triumphed.

She threw both arms round his neck, and kissed him as she had not done for years.

"There may be happier times yet," she whispered. "I go in the hope of them—I cannot say more; there, you must not come with me now;" and, closing the door behind her, she stepped into

the carriage, where all was ready, and told Martin to drive off.

Many times during the journey to the coast, she felt that she must return—must begin that new life that she yet believed possible; but as distance widened between her and Uplands, doubt revived. One by one, Goldsmith's accusations returned, and the earnestness with which they had been uttered. She wondered that she had gone back at all to Uplands: it would have spared both Fred and herself much misery if she had written to him from London, and gone straight to France to seek for Captain Fortescue. Then it occurred to her that her husband could probably have given her a clue by which to find him; but she had heard that Lady Helena and her husband had gone to live at Nardes some months previously—a fashionable French bathing-place not very far from Arden, although on a totally different line of route.

They reached Arden without much delay or difficulty; but when Hester inquired at the hotel where they stopped for Mr. and Mrs. Wrenshaw, she found that they had gone to Nardes for a

fortnight, and had only started the previous day. They seemed to be well known at the hotel, and the garçon said that, although there was no railway or diligence traffic between Arden and Nardes, there was the malle-poste. "Monsieur and Madame Rainshaw had so travelled; there would be room for madame and her maid, if the other servant and some of the baggage could be disposed of. The malle-poste would be starting in an hour, but that would be too soon for madame; she would rest a day or two, so as not to be too much exhausted."

But Hester was in no mood for delay or rest. She was soon settling with Martin to travel back by diligence—there being a difficulty in finding other conveyance to the coast-town whence they had come—and to proceed by railway or in the best way he could thence to Nardes.

The man hesitated.

"Will you travel alone, ma'am? My master particularly said I was not to leave you without protection."

Was it affection, she wondered, or a dread that she might be trying to escape from him, that had made Frederic so anxious.

“You see it cannot be helped, Martin; there is only room for two, and I could not trust Françoise as I can you. I shall find my uncle at Nardes, and shall be quite safe with him till you arrive.”

She had told her husband not to expect to hear from her for at least a week, and it did not occur to her that it was necessary to tell him at once of her change of route.

CHAPTER XII.

WAITING AT THE GATE.

FREDERIC HALLAM had told the truth when he said that he was ill, and before the day closed in—the long weary day that succeeded his wife's departure—he began to feel that the shooting pains in his limbs and a burning throbbing in his temples, and an indisposition to exertion, were symptoms of a more serious nature than he ever remembered before. For, although like many men of his bright complexion, delicate and unable to endure hardship, he had never had a serious illness.

He would not send for the village doctor; oh, no! he was convinced that Ralphie would not have been so ill if he had been properly managed at first; if he did not feel better next day he should telegraph for Dr. —

In one way his illness spared him; his head was so confused that he had no power of concentrated thought, and when at night he fell into broken fragments of slumber, he seemed to be always pursuing some idea that he could not clearly grasp, and yet which he felt himself bound to master. Whether it had been growing through the night, or whether it was a fresh vagary of his wearied brain, when he awoke in the morning, or rather aroused from the dreamy stupor in which the long night had been passed, it was with a fixed determination to revisit Kirton's Farm.

He rang for his railway guide before he had finished dressing, and found that, by starting very early, he could reach Driven in time to ride over to Kirton's Farm, and return to Uplands late in the evening.

Probably through the haze of his fast clouding senses, there glimmered the suspicion that he was about to do something strange and unusual; for when Parkins brought Ralphie down to him at breakfast, he merely told her not to keep the child up to see him, as he should not be home till night.

Parkins was a cautious, quiet woman, too much bound now to her employers to discuss their affairs with her fellow servants; but she had not been blind or unobservant during the last few days, and had come to the conclusion that her master and mistress had quarrelled, and that Mrs. Hallam was not likely to return home in a hurry. Her master was her favourite, and was therefore, of course, the least to blame, and when she saw how pale and haggard he looked this morning, she felt very angry with her mistress.

"You don't look at all well, sir," she said, with the familiarity nurses seem to consider their right when health is in question, and letting Ralphie stand on the table beside his papa; "it's my opinion, sir, you took a heavy cold that day you forgot to change your things. It never does to sit in wet things. You ought to nurse yourself a bit, sir."

"No, I don't feel well. A ride across country will do me good. You can leave Master Ralph, and tell them to bring my horse round; I don't want Simon."

Parkins went away, shaking her head. She did not at all approve of the way things were

going on at Uplands; first her mistress starting off all of a sudden to London, next to France; and then her master, evidently with an illness over him, setting off to ride about alone, no one knew where, for a whole day, and without so much as saying where he was going.

She delivered her message, and then went back for the child.

"You will come back to-night, sir," she said, looking hard at him.

"I told you I should do so."

And he spoke in such an abrupt decided way, that, just lifting Ralphie for a good-bye kiss, she went away without reply.

He was certainly about to do something very unusual, and had Parkins known what he meditated, she would have given her opinion more decidedly, at the risk of making him very angry.

I have before said that Frederic Hallam was accomplished in all manly sports and exercises; and yet, hitherto, he had never been reckless or careless of his health. Now he proposed, ill as he felt, to take a long fatiguing railway journey; to allow himself a bare hour's interval, which he meant to employ in visiting Kirton's Farm, and

then to take the same long journey home. He thought he would take his horse with him; he should find him useful in riding round the farm.

Some confused notion of old Biz and her journey to Uplands must have flitted through his thoughts, for when he reached the station he had persuaded himself that he should find the old servant at Kirton's Farm.

Many times during that day did little Ralphie and his dog, who was with him more than ever since his recovery, go out along the avenue in hopes of meeting his father; and then, tired of waiting, sit down under the lofty chestnut trees to rest, patting his companion's head, and saying sadly in his sweet little voice,—

“No use, Beewee, pap-pa all gone.”

Parkins, sitting at needlework under the shady trees, let him spend the whole afternoon thus; but the little fellow's sadness made her at last feel that a change of ideas would be desirable, and, taking his hand, she prepared to return to the house.

“Come along now, dear, we'll play on the grass a top with Beewee.”

But Ralphie would not leave the avenue, he shook his head.

“Ralphie, stop, see when pap-pa comes,” was all the answer he vouchsafed her, and calling to Beewee to follow him, he ran towards the entrance gates.

There the little creature stood resolutely till past his usual bedtime, shading his eyes with one tiny hand, and looking down the road before him ; with the other, he every now and then patted the great dog as he stood beside him, as if to encourage his patience ; and, although he took no notice of Parkins, he said softly and lovingly to his dumb friend,—

“Not long now, Beewee. Pap-pa come soon.”

But morning came, and still his father had not come back to Ralphie.

CHAPTER XIII.

AT NARDES.

THE malle-poste clattered over the round stones of Nardes, jumping Françoise nearly into her mistress's lap, and stopped at last in the court-yard of a large comfortable-looking hotel.

There were plenty of loungers about, who all turned to look at the beautiful, well-dressed Englishwoman when she stepped from the vehicle.

A buzz of curiosity followed her as she disappeared under the portico, for among the ways of killing time at Nardes, none is more in favour than that of discussing everybody's looks and dress, and understanding everybody's business better than he does himself.

"*Anglaise, pur sang*," said one gentleman, whose small stature, fiercely twirled moustache, and stiff gait, seemed to announce his military pro-

fession, but who really was a clerk in the Douane of Nardes, and who, thus raised a step, and but a step above the shop-keepers, delighted in asserting his importance and individuality in the most approved fashion of the day. It is plain that those old-fashioned doctrines about humility, and taking the lowest place, and talking as little as possible about oneself and one's belongings, were not intended for this superior and enlightened age. "*Nous avons changé tout cela,*" both in England and France. Our donanier, Monsieur Simon, was a lady-killer, and he already began to calculate at which of the *soirées* to which he was admitted, he might possibly have the opportunity of fascinating the lovely Englishwoman.

"*Pas si mal,*" said another, the son of the chief banker of the town, who was coming from the hotel as Hester entered with another gentleman. "But why is it," he continued, "that these Englishwomen never smile? They think enough of themselves, one may see that by their manner, and the way they claim, as an established right, *place aux dames*; but for all that they do not make the most of themselves."

Monsieur Adolphe Bouchet had spent three

weeks in London, and therefore was a great authority in such matters, although, perhaps, with the quick insight into character which both Frenchmen and Frenchwomen possess, three weeks will teach them more than three months in France would to one of our ordinary, dignified, self-conscious countrymen. A Frenchman does not suppose that every one is looking at him, criticising his dress, his looks, and, above all, his accent. He is perfectly aware of his own importance; but then it is, and has always been, such a recognised fact that it does not trouble him; he is more bent on making himself agreeable from a species of courteous vanity in which we are deficient; and then he seeks, as the chief object of his existence, to amuse himself; and any one who does this sincerely, with no *arrière pensée*, is pretty certain to be amusing to others. And being free from himself, he has all his faculties under command to observe others.

Monsieur Bouchet's companion, a country cousin from the interior, who had seen few English, had been struck dumb with the sight of Hester's beauty.

"Perhaps," he said simply, in answer to his

cousin's assertion, "the lady would be too beautiful if she smiled: she would then be an angel."

"Bah! Théophile. I am thinking now it is possible these Anglaises have ugly teeth, and that is why they cannot smile; we will see at the theatre, for Levassor is here, you know, and she must laugh at Levassor."

"And if she has ugly teeth, my friend," said his literal cousin, "she will laugh behind her fan."

Hester, meanwhile, found herself again disappointed. An English lady and gentleman answering her description, had applied for rooms on the previous day; but Monsieur Montoreau, the host, with shoulders raised to his ears and uplifted hands, had been obliged, to his deep sorrow, to confess that there was no place to be had, and had sent them to the Hotel de l'Europe, a little further down on the other side of the street. He wished madame to receive the assurance of his infinite regrets, and accompanied her to the entrance gate to point out the Hotel de l'Europe. Her appearance caused a second lull in the talk among the group of idlers, not from any fear that she might overhear the admiration she had excited—a Frenchman seems to consider that an "*Anglaise*"

can swallow any amount of flattery—but in order that they might, by a closer scrutiny, satisfy themselves that they had not overrated her attractions.

Their fixed gaze annoyed her, and she raised her head proudly, and walked on with a quicker step.

This excited Monsieur Simon's admiration beyond control: he launched into an extasy of praise, and compared Hester to about half-a-dozen goddesses at once.

"She is then more beautiful than your English Miladi," said a friend.

"*Je crois bien,*" repeated Monsieur Simon, several times, with scornful emphasis. "It is," he continued, striking his breast vehemently, "as Aurora beside the dark-browed night—as Venus beside Thalestris—ah, she is divine, adorable." Then smiling, and checking himself as he saw smiles on the faces of some of his hearers, although they were too polite to laugh—"Messieurs," he said, bowing with his hand on his heart, "I am poet, and the sight of such an irresistible beauty awakens the divine flame in my soul; but it can only be expressed in verses."

And after he left them still the other idlers

did not laugh; they were mostly younger than Monsieur Simon, and admired him as a genius, who some day would prove a beacon to his native town, as it was known that all the stray pieces of rhyme which appeared in the *Messenger de Nardes*, were the offspring of his inspiration, although there were some of the more educated townspeople, among others Monsieur Bouchet, who had not lingered among the idlers, but had walked on in advance of Hester and her maid; for M. Adolphe had seen her look of annoyance, —who attributed these poems to a very diligent perusal of André Chénier, rather than to any inward promptings.

M. Simon, the little douanier, watched Hester enter the Hotel de l'Europe, and after satisfying himself that she had taken up her abode there, departed to his bureau, resolved, if possible, to gain an introduction to her in the evening promenade on the *Jetée*.

"For," as he said to himself, "she is probably one of these English *veuves voyageuses*, and no doubt knows everybody here."

Hester had been shown into one of those comfortless, but gaudy-looking rooms, where

looking-glasses in elaborately gilt frames, with girandoles to match, and a couple of pendules on marble tables, seem to express, that looking at themselves, and keeping appointments, are the chief wants of travellers.

Mrs. Wrenshaw came in soon, but she did not know her niece, and made her a formal courtesy. Hester had merely given her name to the waiter, and it had, of course, reached her aunt's ears under a new form.

It was very painful just then not to be welcomed immediately—in her over-wrought state, Hester felt as though she must leave Nardes at once; but in a moment her aunt had recognized her, and then the warmth of her greeting atoned for her first stiffness.

“I do not think your uncle will know you, either. You are grown such a woman, Hester.”

Mr. Wrenshaw was away, she said. There was a review at St. Arlaix, about twenty miles off, and he had gone to see it, and would not return for a day or two. It was doubly delightful to see her dear niece, when she had been counting on two long dreary days without Mr. Wrenshaw.

“We shall be two doleful widows together,

Hester, dear, and must try to keep up each other's spirits."

Not a word of reproach to her niece for her long silence. She only seemed overjoyed at Hester's affection in accepting her invitation so frankly, and, though she asked kindly after her husband, she made no comment on his absence.

Hester felt like a hypocrite. In her rare intercourse with aunt Wrenshaw, she had always been drawn to frankness with her; and when as they were sitting together in the evening, Mrs. Wrenshaw said,—“I am so glad, my dear child, for your sake, that we secured a sitting-room at once, for the place is filling fast. At first we thought only of having a comfortable bedroom, and using the *table-d'hôte*; but that would not have been nice for you—you are not used to makeshifts”—Hester said abruptly,—

“Aunt, I must tell you the truth. I did not come here on purpose to see you. I had another reason.”

“What was that?” said her aunt, without raising her eyes from her knitting.

But finding that no answer came she looked up.

Hester's head was bent, and her face hidden between her hands.

In a moment the ball of cotton had fallen to the ground and the pins lay idly in her lap, as her aunt laid one hand gently on Hester's shoulder.

"What is it, my dear child," she said, in that soft, earnest tone, which only those who have been mothers can use, and which seems as powerful in winning confidence, as it is gentle in its manner of doing so.

The voice, the gentle touch, the loving fearlessness—for, after all, had not it been the secret curse of Hester's life, that all who knew her well, feared her—pierced straight through the barriers her pride, and coldness, and intense reserve had reared on all sides of her heart, till it seemed well nigh for ever fenced away from human sympathy.

Closer the hands were pressed over the eyes, and tighter the slender fingers clasped the burning forehead, yet through these last outward helps, by which the proud woman sought to shield her sorrow from the gaze of others, nature forced its way in hot tears and bursting sobs, that seemed too strong for such a young tender frame to bear.

Mrs. Wrenshaw was distressed and surprised. She had been used to deal with gentle, loving natures, and this passionate vehemence frightened her.

She took the wisest course she could ; she did not attempt to check or restrain what seemed to be the outpouring of an overburdened heart, but sate patiently beside her, waiting till the very violence of the emotion should bring calm.

But when Hester, having checked her sobs, rose to go away, her aunt stopped her.

“Stay here, dearest,” she said, “no one will disturb you, and you need not fear that I shall press you with questions, Hester, if I find that you are unwilling to tell what causes this unhappiness.”

Hester sate down again, but she did not speak for some time. Her tears ceased, but she kept her eyes fixed on the ground with a look of hopeless misery.

“I will tell you all some day, aunt Hester,” she said at last ; “now it seems hardly right to do so, until I have decided how to act.”

“I must ask you to tell me one thing,” said her aunt, gravely, for something had jarred

her in the tone of the last words. "You have not come here in opposition to your husband's wishes, or because there is any estrangement between you? Forgive me, my dear child, for asking this," for Hester had coloured deeply, "but it seemed strange to me to hear you speak of deciding on your own actions."

"I came here with my husband's consent," said Hester; "but I scarcely understand why you should be surprised at my deciding for myself; surely every woman is the best judge of what her own conduct should be."

Mrs. Wrenshaw looked at her in astonishment. Could this be the shrinking, timid girl whose silence she had always attributed to a consciousness of her own deficiencies? She had been much struck by the change in her niece's manner and appearance, but she had attributed the almost haughty self-possession with which she gave her orders, to the position she now occupied as mistress of Uplands; she had not suspected the inward self-will and self-reliance from which it sprung, nor the over-weening pride in her own intellect which made Hester unwilling to submit to any control save her own.

“No, I do not think so; certainly, no married woman can judge so well for herself as her husband can.”

Hester's lips curled, and yet for the first time a faint doubt of herself arose. Could this be the aunt Wrenshaw whose talents and education had always seemed dream-like to her childhood? To be as clever, as well-read, as aunt Hester, had then seemed more than she dared to hope; and now, in her highly gifted superiority, she despised her for submitting her will to that of any one, or rather she tried to despise her. As she looked in her aunt's face, she felt that, though sorrow and suffering had left few traces of mere facial beauty, there was a cheerful peace, a look of deep happiness, she had never seen in her own.

There is a singular fascination about some women—and it does not belong to any particular type among them; it may be found among the shy and reserved, and also among franker, warmer natures, but I think it seldom exists except in a very loving temperament—I mean the power of winning the confidence of others, without any effort of their own, sometimes almost contrary to their wishes. Troubles, sorrows, heart-breaks, joys,

are poured out to them, as if the speaker were irresistibly impelled like Columbus, in search of a new world, to seek the unseen unspoken sympathy, he feels sure of finding.

It is dangerous to pass an evening alone with one of these persons; they are not inquisitive, because, as I have said, they rather shrink from, than seek, the responsibility which confidences entail; but, however reserved you may be, if you have any secret sorrow or trouble pressing you down, it will be strange if you do not strive, much as it may be against your previous resolutions, to share the burden of it with your friend.

Hester fell under this spell, although she rebelled against it. She did not answer at once, but sat thinking, while Mrs. Wrenshaw resumed her knitting.

"I have dropped so many stitches," she said, "that I must go to the other window to get better light: I am knitting your uncle's winter socks; he likes my knitting so much better than those he buys."

Hester sighed; how many times her aunt had referred to him, while she, except in reply to Mrs. Wrenshaw's questions, had not mentioned her husband's name.

She began to see that they argued from different points, and consequently could not understand each other's feelings.

"But, aunt," she said, after a long silence, "what you said just now would of course be true, where a husband's judgment is equal or superior to a wife's, and also when he is able to appreciate the principles on which she acts."

It had grown very dark where Hester was sitting; she could not see her aunt's pained, surprised look.

"I don't understand you," she said, quickly; "husbands and wives ought to understand each other, it is their duty; but, even supposing this is unhappily not so, it is always a wife's place to submit to her husband."

"Supposing she does not consider him honourable, is she to trust him?" said Hester, bitterly.

And then she wished the words unsaid.

Mrs. Wrenshaw did not answer; she longed most earnestly that her husband were at home to counsel her in this matter; she was so accustomed to look to him for guidance, that she felt only half herself without him.

She was sure that there was something very

wrong between Frederic Hallam and his wife, and yet she was so afraid of thinking matters worse than they really were, that she dared not hazard any conjectures; she had always imagined that Hester loved Mr. Hallam very dearly; had she not given up all her own family for him? Mr. Wrenshaw had said the young man had had a view to her money in marrying, and, considering how greatly she was in every way his inferior, it seemed probable; but still her aunt had fondly cherished the notion that any man must eventually learn to appreciate Hester for her own sake; and when she saw her refined, beautiful, all that she considered the wife of such a man as Frederic Hallam ought to be, she had not at first doubted that they were perfectly happy in each other's affection.

Her niece's unwillingness to speak of her husband had roused an uneasiness which her subsequent words had deepened into fear.

The street was very dark now, and the passengers and traffic had gradually diminished to an almost unbroken stillness.

"I will ring for lights," she said rising, when they had sat some time longer in silence.

“No, don’t have lights, aunt”—Hester spoke in the old hard, abrupt way.

Her aunt started; she could scarcely see her in the darkness, and she could have fancied her again the uncultivated girl at Kirton’s Farm.

“Then I will close this window,” she said, “for it grows chilly to a rheumatic old woman like me. How heavy they are,” she said as she pushed the cumbrous lattices together, “and what bolts! except that they shut from inside, and have panes instead of lozenges, do you know, Hester, they remind me of the windows at Kirton’s Farm.”

How glad Hester was that the room was in darkness then.

“Have you seen the Farm lately? Oh, no; I forgot how long you have been in France. Aunt Hester,” she said, suddenly; “I want you to tell me if you have met with a Captain Fortescue here or at Arden?”

The question surprised Mrs. Wrenshaw, it seemed so irrelevant.

“Not at Arden, and you forget I have only been here two days,” she said. “I scarcely know any one yet; but stay, there are some people of the name of Fortescue here; I have heard their

names mentioned; in fact, I believe I am to meet them at a soirée to-morrow at Madame de Saint Charles. You will have to go with me, Hester; you will create quite a sensation."

Hester smiled bitterly.

"I did not count on going into society, aunt; but if there is a chance of seeing Captain Fortescue, I will gladly go. I thought you said you did not know any one."

"No, I don't; but when we arrived here we met a friend of a very old friend of ours, Mrs. Snody, and she insists on my going to this party; but I think it was a Lady Mary, or a Lady Something Fortescue, that she said I was to meet."

Hester sickened with disgust and disappointment. Could she face that cruel woman who had poisoned all her happiness? and yet where Lady Helena was, her brother-in-law might possibly be, or, at any rate, she might learn where he was, if she could make up her mind to speak to her.

"It is, no doubt, Lady Helena Fortescue—a hateful woman whom I detest."

"Oh, my dear child, you are not in earnest," for her manner was frightfully vehement.

"Yes, I am, aunt Hester. She did me, three

years ago, the greatest wrong one woman can do to another. You do not expect me to forget it."

"But you surely have not cherished revenge all this time. Hester, my dear child, you are greatly changed."

"Yes, I am changed; and it is chiefly Lady Helena's work. But I do not cherish revenge; I have no wish or intention of punishing her for the injury she did me, therefore I have forgiven her; to forget is another matter, it is out of one's power. I shock you, I see, aunt Hester; but you will not wonder some day. When I have seen Captain Fortescue, and I earnestly hope to do so to-morrow, you shall know everything; that is, if it be as I fear."

Mrs. Wrenshaw felt anxious to know more; but she saw that it would be unkind and useless to question Hester further.

CHAPTER XIV.

A SOIRÉE AT MADAME ST. CHARLES.

MADAME DE ST. CHARLES was a stout, well preserved widow, nearer sixty than fifty years of age; but as her hair was scarcely grey, and arranged in becoming close curls, so as to conceal the wrinkles about her eyes, she might have passed for a good deal younger, had she been thinner; directly she moved, her unwieldy size destroyed the youthful illusion of her face; and therefore Madame de Saint Charles moved as little as possible in society, and usually contrived to give her soirées when her young sister-in-law, Madame de Camille Laurent was paying her annual visit to Nardes.

For Madame de Camille Laurent received charmingly, and she knew it; and as her good middle-aged husband—she was very much attached to him, though he was twenty years her senior—

was quite as fond of lively society as she was, they liked their sister's little receptions, and greatly enhanced the amusement to themselves by encouraging her to mix her guests more unscrupulously than she would otherwise have done.

For it is to be understood that Madame de Saint Charles was noble, and that the prefix to the name of Camille Laurent was a genuine *de* not derived from the purchase of a small farm, dignified by the name *propriété*, some twenty acres in extent, the possessor having been originally a grocer or butcher named Duval or Dupont, the Jones' and Browns of France; such things, as we know, are common enough in France, where the native impudence of one man will *ennoble* a whole family. But this family was really old, and had distinguished itself formerly both in camp and council. Madame de Saint Charles's grandfather had been a peer of France; but in the Revolution he had lost all, and although his daughter had swallowed her pride and married a wealthy avocat, when he died suddenly and left her a comparatively young widow, she found herself obliged to live with strict economy.

Her brother had been more fortunate, and had managed to keep his post through all the changes of dynasty. He was not rich; but he and his wife lived very comfortably in Paris, where, in right of their position by birth, they enjoyed the best society of the capital, and were far more liberal in their notions than their provincial sister, who, besides the distinction of feeling herself "the best blood in the town," had also the exclusiveness generally to be found in those who have lost caste by a *mésalliance*, and who are for ever trying to scramble up into their own place again; or at least to assert their high and mighty claims.

It became, then, a sort of *lutte* among those families in the town who were ambitious, to obtain invitations for these *soirées*. To Madame de Saint Charles' credit be it said, especially in an age like the present, she was no money worshipper, and, fond as she was of the English, she knew very well that the best appointed houses in the town, and the best hotel, were usually occupied by *parvenu* John Bull and his train of carriages and servants. Still she was sometimes deceived; people managed to get letters of introduction to

her from others who ought never to have given them; and Mrs. Snody was one of these. With the quick discrimination of a Frenchwoman, Madame de Saint Charles would have been delighted to receive Mr. and Mrs. Wrenshaw; but she looked inquiringly at her sister as Madame de Camille Laurent, gliding gracefully through the now assembling guests, came up to greet the new arrivals, headed by Mrs. Snody.

Madame de Camille Laurent had been roused from a confidential talk with her dear friend of the moment, Lady Helena Fortescue, by a subdued murmur of admiration.

She had hoped that Lady Helena would be the centre of attraction to all the young men, whom the fair deputy hostess was rather at a loss how to amuse—there were so many of them. In her kindness of heart, and her utter disregard of consequences—for, safe back in Paris (as she told her husband in the charming, sparkling way to which he never could refuse consent) what could it matter to them whom they had met at Nardes—she had invited several strangers. Men were scarce as yet, for the season was only beginning—I mean the sort of men Madame

de Saint Charles thought worth inviting—but then, as Madame Camille justly argued,—

“Crinoline and head-dresses will not do alone; they must be talked to, or I shall lose my reputation for arranging the most charming *soirées* of Nardes.”

And, among others, she had been graciously pleased to persuade her husband to invite our little *douanier*, Monsieur Simon, not, as she explained with much fluency to her scrupulous sister-in-law, in regard of his position—that was of course inadmissible—but as a poet and a man who might be an honour to his native town.

“In Paris,” she said, “we adore genius; it opens all doors, let the possessor be whom he will; and believe me, no *soirée* ever goes so well, or with so much spirit, as where there are artists, authors, poets—people, in short, who, being constantly obliged to use their mental faculties, have them always bright and ready; their tongues are not rusted, or their ideas either.”

This was a hyperbolic view of Monsieur Simon, but he had won Madame Camille’s good graces the year before by jumping into the water, or rather stepping knee-deep into it, after her parasol,

thereby damaging his new *pantalon*, and had afterwards written some verses on the occasion in the *Messenger*; and although sweet Madame Camille was not vain—for a Frenchwoman—still she could not forget (who does really?) the self-devotion he had shown—and this was her reward.

M. Simon had been standing hitherto in mute but ecstatic contemplation of his dark-browed idol, Lady Helena, the tallest woman in the room, and of course in his estimation the best worth looking at, although most men would have preferred the slighter make, the charmingly piquant face, and graceful winning manner of Madame Camille herself. She was very pretty by candle-light. Her *mâte* complexion was then of a dazzling whiteness; her luxuriant raven-black hair, brought round her head in a coronet without any other ornament, and her plain white dress of some soft gauzy fabric, showed to advantage her lovely neck and arms. She might have been called too pale; but the brilliant red of her lips, which seemed ever smiling, relieved this, as did also the animated expression of her soft long brown eyes.

Lady Helena had far more regular features—

more *teint*, as Monsieur Simon would have said; her figure was more finely developed. She looked well in repose; but then she was overdressed, and her insufferably haughty expression was still more apparent beside the smiling, courteous Frenchwoman.

She, too, had remarked the buzz and earnest gaze directed towards the post where Madame de Saint Charles sate enthroned; but she saw some ladies entering, and Lady Helena was not inquisitive. She had come alone that evening, her husband having also gone to the review at St. Arlaix. Madame Camille had expressed herself *au désespoir*.

"I know you English always prefer to go out with your husbands," she said, just before she left her friend.

And then Lady Helena felt it dull to be alone. She liked society, although in her now impoverished circumstances she could no longer receive; and she cared for admiration and adoration rather more than ever, because, perhaps, she felt her charms were waning, only she did not to-night approve of that little Monsieur Simon's presence. He had been hovering about

her at a respectful distance ever since her arrival at Nardes some months ago, and so let him hover. She had no objection to that, but to find him in a *salon*, so near to her that every moment she expected he might speak, was more than she liked.

She turned round to see if he were still there.

He was gone, and not alone. The whole bevy of gentlemen, hitherto clustered like a group of devotees on a fête day before the image of the saint commemorated, had disappeared; there was no one near Lady Helena but old, toothless M. Dupuy, with his red ribbon and his snuff box, and she turned away much more quickly than usual, lest he should take her glance for an invitation to come and talk to her.

Spite of her pride and indifference, she could not help looking across the room to discover the cause of this unusual desertion.

She heard M. de Camille Laurent's singular voice—a mixture of bass and falsetto—with which he seemed to be singing a perpetual duet with himself, speaking in his most adulatory tones to some one, near whom there were so many gentle-

men that it was impossible to see through them. After a time, and when, in compliment to the English visitors, tea was brought, Madame de Camille again approached, bearing a cup of tea herself for this distinguished guest, loaded so plentifully with sugar that the topmost lump was visible, and which she assured her friend she had *sucrée* for her herself, as English people liked everything sweet.

“I never drink sugar, thank you,” said Lady Helena, ungraciously. She had just through the group of men caught a vision of a very beautiful woman engaged in animated conversation with Madame de Saint Charles and her brother, and felt extremely annoyed and neglected. The face seemed familiar, but she could not recall where she had seen it, and yet that stately but graceful head, its fair, waving hair brushed back from the temples, those delicate features and singularly transparent skin, were sufficiently remarkable to be recollected. Lady Helena felt sure that her rival—for it was, doubtless, this new star that had robbed her of her admirers—was a distinguished person; there was no possibility of mistaking her style—it was perfect.

"Who is that," she asked Madame Camille, "talking to your husband?"

"Ah, that lovely creature, she is English; possibly among your friends, Mrs.—Mrs.—*comment*, I forget your English names, it is Hallam, I think, and the lady with her Mrs. Rainshaw."

The name was said plainly enough for Lady Helena, and set every nerve quivering with jealous pride. This was Frederic Hallam's despised wife.

"Has she a husband here?" she asked.

We never really forgive those we have injured, or, if we think we do, we cannot endure that they should stand well in the opinion of others; she resolved to make sure of this stranger's identity with Frederic Hallam's low-born wife, and if it were as she thought, she would take very good care not to be troubled with Hester's presence in any *salon* she might honour with hers.

"I do not know; I never saw her before. She came with a Madame Snody—*tenez, la voilà*."

"Mrs. whom did you say?" said Helena Fortescue, as a loud-talking, handsomely dressed woman emerged from the group, and advanced towards them.

"That is Mrs. Snody," said Madame Camille, with a doubtful smile. "I do not think she is of your society; she is a cousin of some gentleman who has been a lord mayor, and my husband tells me your lord mayor is not a person of the highest distinction.

"No, not exactly." Lady Helena felt too much annoyed to laugh, as M. de Camille Laurent, speaking excellent English, approached, beside the cousin of a former lord mayor. Mrs. Snody now seated herself beside her titled countrywoman in a flutter of delight at finding herself on equal terms with any one who was a lady in her own right.

But although he persevered at first in speaking English, Mrs. Snody was not going to lose such a chance of displaying her French; perhaps she took the opportunity of practising it in the hope of improvement. With all his politeness, her accent was so detestable that Monsieur de Camille Laurent could scarcely understand her.

She was trying to make him comprehend that she had a son with her, whom she had wished to bring to the party, but that "*pauvre chose, il a le mal à les dents—pauvre chose, pauvre chose!*" she

repeated, shaking her head, and appealing to Lady Helena.

The polite Frenchman bowed and looked concerned and mystified; but Lady Helena was less courteous. She saw that directly he went away Mrs. Snody would attack her. She looked at Monsieur de Camille Laurent, and laughed.

"It is *incroyable*, is it not?" she said. "Will you gratify my curiosity, and take me to see those lovely flowers?" and, rising, she swept past her countrywoman, and left her in disappointed solitude.

Much as Hester had shrunk from the idea of meeting Lady Helena, when once she had determined to accompany her aunt, she had also resolved to address her enemy, should she have the opportunity of doing so; and when she saw the moderate-sized room, and how people moved about, rarely remaining fixed long anywhere, she made up her mind that it would be easily effected.

When she first entered, she had been amused with the sensation her appearance created, and then she had been interested in observing the tasteful decorations of the room.

She found herself very soon acquainted with almost every one, and was just going to ask for Lady Helena when she saw her with M. de Camille Laurent.

Helena Fortescue gave her a cold scrutinizing glance as she passed on towards some flowers, grouped in a species of alcove which formed one end of the room.

To her surprise the glance was firmly returned, and Hester bowed—bowed, not in any timid or deprecating manner, but with a sweet condescending smile.

For the first time in her life the proud woman was surprised out of her self-possession; she returned a stately courtesy, and when M. de Camille Laurent asked if she had known that charming Mrs. Hallam in England, she hesitated in her reply, not from fear, but from an unusual prudence.

He was evidently a great admirer of beauty, and yet he was not as devoted to her as she considered fitting; he had married a young wife, and therefore youthful charms would be sure to attract him, and he was just now the leading man at Nardes. On the whole, she thought it safer and

wiser to tell Madame de Camille Laurent about Hester's antecedents, and not her husband.

"Yes; she is a pretty creature, is she not? You French gentlemen are more easily pleased than our English ones. Mrs. Hallam would be more a lady's beauty in England than a gentleman's."

They had reached the end of the room, and, turning again, were just repassing Hester.

Hester looked up at M. de Camille Laurent with one of her rare but winning smiles.

"I have already forgotten," she said as he stood before her awaiting her commands, for he imagined, too, that Lady Helena would wish to speak to her countrywoman, "the name of this beautiful village you say we ought to visit?"

"You must not stand," said Madame de Saint Charles, and she made room on her sofa for Helena Fortescue between herself and Hester.

It was not a large party; although the room was small, it might have been much fuller, and nearly all the men were gathered round the new idol. At first Helena had thought that, by persisting in her isolation, she should mark her contempt for her rival, and finally triumph, but a nearer glimpse of Hester's beauty had stimulated

her audacity, and she resolved to place herself near her, and carry away her admirers, as it were, by a *coup-de-main*.

Hester just waited for M. de Camille's answer, although she did not take in the sense of what he said ; she was so afraid of missing the chance of speaking to Lady Helena.

"Is your brother here with you?" she asked, in the easy, straight-forward manner in which we address an intimate, rather than a person seen only once, and then under painful circumstances.

Helena Fortescue had expected resentment, fear, reproaches, anything rather than this lofty equality, asserted, too, in a tone as polished as her own ; perhaps for the first time she was dealing with a woman whose power of self-control was stronger than hers ; for there was no trace of resentment in Hester's countenance, and she felt her own brow was lowering ; if she could have believed such an impossibility, she would have said this country girl despised her.

"You mean, I imagine," she said, haughtily—for at any rate the by-standers should not say that she treated Mrs. Hallam as an equal,—“Mr. Fortescue's brother : are you acquainted with him?”

Hester smiled.

"You have a short memory, I see," she said—it was useless now to keep up an appearance of cordiality, although she was resolved to curb any outward betrayal of anger—"Captain Percy Fortescue is my husband's most intimate friend."

"Ah, and you are, therefore, deeply interested in him."

"No," she could not help colouring slightly, "but I should like to see him on business if he is in Nardes."

There was a slight quiver in her voice, which betrayed that her indifference was assumed.

A hundred conjectures flashed through the other's brain; but whether any of them were true or false, she was resolved Percy Fortescue should not meet her; it would be an excellent way of ridding herself of this girl, whom she began to hate—to put her on a false scent.

"He left Nardes, yesterday, with my husband, but he will not return here; I think, he is bound for the Italian lakes, and will possibly go on to Sicily." Now Captain Fortescue had left it undecided whether he should not return before he went on further.

"Are you sure of this?" said Hester, fixing her eyes upon her; "perhaps you have his next address," she said, after a pause.

"I regret to say I have not," said Helena, regaining her self-command as the other became earnest. "It is a pity, is it not, when you are so deeply interested to know where he is to be found?"

Her sneer brought a deep flush to Hester's face, but the next instant she raised her head loftily,—

"I *am* deeply interested in knowing where Captain Fortescue is to be found; you are quite right in thinking so, Lady Helena, and I shall really be thankful to you, if you can help me in my search."

There was no possibility of mistaking Hester as she said this. Her face spoke the most perfect purity and dignity, and Helena's eyes fell before its earnest glance.

"I have told you all I can about the matter," she said, sullenly, and turning completely away.

The surrounding group, if they had not understood all that passed, had diligently studied the two faces, and had rightly read a noble independence in the one, and jealous dislike in the other;

for, to do Helena justice, mere want of birth would not have provoked her insolence, unless her passions were previously roused. She could be a lady when she chose to show herself one.

Monsieur Simon had got into conversation with Mrs. Wrenshaw, to whom he expressed his devoted admiration of her niece, so that she had scarcely remarked Hester's earnest conversation ; but now following the douanier's eyes, she saw the flush on Hester's cheek, and overheard her last words.

As soon as she could, she spoke to her by way of interrupting what she felt sure was painful when she saw who was her companion, thereby crowning Monsieur Simon's happiness. Ah, yes, he was right, when those eyes smiled at him ; they were far sweeter than Lady Helena's ; they were not certainly so much "*des yeux de keepsake*," but he felt less afraid of them, and then he asked Hester if she meant to bathe.

"No," she had no present intention of doing so.

He was disappointed to find some exaggerated compliments unappreciated.

He could not have imagined that blue eyes could have looked so cold, so indifferent to his admiration.

He had been about to compose a poem, comparing Hester to a golden-haired Nereide, but then as he reflected, sea-nymphs might be justly supposed colder than more earthly beings, and her queen-like manner completed her charms in his eyes. Poor little fellow, he was hopelessly in love before the end of the evening, and so were all the rest, and yet Hester gave them no encouragement; but the heart of a Frenchman is inflammable, only, like lucifer matches, the blaze is soon out and over.

There was something about Hester that kept even Frenchmen at a distance, intense and unbounded as is their admiration for beauty, and especially that of fair English women. They seemed to content themselves with mute worship, after having exchanged a few words with her. She received their homage with such perfect indifference—as so completely her due, that their vanity was not in any way flattered, and if she had not been so rarely beautiful, as Frenchmen they would probably have found this wearisome; but then, although indifferent, she was not haughty; and Lady Helena, as each moment she perceived more fully the universal court paid to Mrs.

Hallam, looked darker and sterner than she had ever looked before, as the poetical Monsieur Simon whispered to one of his friends,—

“ Like Medea beside Creusa, or Queen Eleanor and Rosamond Clifford.”

Her ill-temper stiffened her face, and contracted her brows, and at last finding the position she occupied utterly intolerable, she left the party early, without having had the opportunity she desired of warning Madame de Camille Laurent against Hester.

Her departure was a great relief to Mrs. Snody, who had felt thoroughly snubbed ever since Lady Helena laughed at her.

She came across to the others now, she had been afraid to move before — what is it that makes some people stationary as statues, as if they had paid for one particular chair, and meant to keep it?—and addressed herself to Monsieur de Camille Laurent.

“ *Aimes tu cette dame, monsieur?* ” she said, in her loud voice.

Every one looked round, and several of the gentlemen smiled ; but Mrs. Snody went on unconsciously —

“ *Est-ce qu'elle te plait, à toi,*” she said, with emphasis.

It was impossible to help laughing. Even the ever polite M. de Camille Laurent smiled so apparently, that Mrs. Snody began to see she had made some serious mistake; and Hester, suffering for her countrywoman, whispered to her aunt that she thought they had better go, as it was getting late; and under cover of the compliments and regrets this produced, Mrs. Snody's victim escaped her, while the rest of the party consoled themselves for the absence of the English ladies, by an exciting game at *lansquenet*.

CHAPTER XV.

A FISSURE IN THE ROCK.

WELL might Hester have seemed strangely cold and indifferent to the admiration she had excited. Only her pride sustained her from betraying utter despair, when she found that her hope of seeing Captain Fortescue was fruitless ; but there was an expression in his sister-in-law's eyes, before which she would sooner have died than evinced any emotion. She would heap scorn for scorn on the woman who had again insulted her. She was too overwrought and too free from vanity to value the triumph she had gained in robbing Helena Fortescue of her admirers, and driving her from the field ; but still it was gratifying to feel that they had met as equals, and that she had felt herself superior to her enemy.

But as soon as she and her aunt were alone in

their apartments, all this was forgotten. What should she do now? She stood still in the middle of the salon clasping her hands together, and trying to think. But in the agony of fear lest Fortescue should escape her, thought swayed restlessly, it seemed impossible to reconcentrate it. Suddenly an idea started from the confusion as clearly as if a ray of light had fallen on it alone. Lady Helena knew where to find Captain Fortescue, only she had resolved to withhold this knowledge—how was she to force it from her? She saw that, with such a character, nothing but submission would avail, and could she bend to her? Yes, she could do anything to know whether Fortescue had been aware of her husband's conduct. Could she persuade her aunt to go to Lady Helena (she knew very well she could not bring herself to do it) and get the information she wanted. She would try.

“You are wondering why I keep you here, aunt, when I said just now it was late. I must speak to you before we separate to-night. You saw me with Lady Helena? Well, she and I had best not meet again; but I want you to go to her to-morrow.”

"Me, my dear child?" exclaimed Mrs. Wrenshaw; "why, she does not know who I am."

"You can say you come from me, to entreat her as a favour to give the address of her brother-in-law, Captain Fortescue."

Mrs. Wrenshaw looked at Hester, surprised and anxious.

"What is this gentleman to you, Hester, that you are so eager to see him," for she remembered her niece's previous question.

"He was, and is, I believe, my husband's dearest friend."

"And is it by Mr. Hallam's request you are seeking him now?"

"No, it is not," said Hester. She felt desperate, hemmed in by obstacles on all sides, which it seemed impossible to remove.

"Hester," her aunt spoke very seriously, "I love you, and trust you; but it seems to me that I cannot act blindfold in these matters. Supposing that I obtained this address for you, what would be your next step?"

"I shall immediately write to Captain Fortescue, or, if he is not very far off, get you to take me to him."

"I cannot promise to do it," said Mrs. Wrenshaw; "at any rate, not till I have consulted your uncle."

"Aunt Hester," she said, passionately, "you do not know what you are about, if you hinder me now. Uncle Wrenshaw's return may be delayed, and Captain Fortescue will have travelled far away, where my letter may be weeks reaching him. Speed is my only hope—it is the only thing I ever asked of you, aunt Hester," she said, in a tone of vehement reproach; "and, if you knew the consequences, you would not refuse."

Mrs. Wrenshaw was strangely perplexed; this mystery and agitation formed such a new feature in her tranquil life, that it seemed more like a dream than reality. She paused to think.

"Then you refuse to help me," said Hester, passionately, although her will could not believe that it was at length resisted.

"Listen to me and calm yourself, Hester," and Mrs. Wrenshaw sate down quietly. "Things cannot go on in this way any longer between us—it is impossible for me not to be aware that there is some serious cause of difference between your-

self and your husband." Hester started. "At first I did not press for your confidence, because it seems to me that, in trials of this kind, any third person's interference is unwise, and often increases the trouble, whatever it may be; but now that you are about to consult a stranger, a young unmarried man, who has no claim on your confidence, I tell you plainly, that you would do more wisely to consult me, instead."

"I cannot," she said, wildly and scarcely knowing what she said, for the strain upon her self-control during the evening had weakened its power, and she was swayed by the tempest of passion she had hitherto kept in check. "You cannot help me—you cannot prove my husband's innocence or guilt. Oh, God help me!" she exclaimed suddenly, as if maddened by her powerlessness to persuade. "Oh, aunt Hester—aunt Hester, I will tell you all, and then you must help me—you cannot refuse."

She threw herself on the ground beside Mrs. Wrenshaw, and burying her face in her lap, poured out the whole story of her wrongs, beginning from her marriage, and ending with Goldsmith's last accusation against her husband.

Her aunt listened, sad and hushed. And she had thought that Hester, grown careless in her happiness, had given up her relations, because she was so attached to her husband that she cared for no love but his.

She asked her gently now why this had been.

"Do you think I could bear you should all know my misery?" was the proud answer.

"But, if I understand you rightly, your husband's conduct has been kind and affectionate since you have lived at Uplands; has there been no decided reconciliation between you."

"No, how could I trust him again, when he had deceived me so cruelly?"

"And yet from your own showing you were about to do so when you saw Mr. Goldsmith?"

"It was a folly, a weakness, and I have been justly punished for yielding to it. Why should I forgive a man who has poisoned all my belief in human nature, who has never even asked for forgiveness?"

"Hester! it seems to me your husband has by his conduct been offering the truest atonement. I fear, my poor child, that your

unforgivingness towards him equals his first error."

"I might have expected this," said Hester, raising her head proudly; "every one has always been against me ever since I was born; no one has ever loved me——"

"Hester, dear, you are not yourself now, and that makes you unjust," said her aunt soothingly.

"And," continued Hester, interrupting her, "does not this discovery show that I have been right, and that he is not to be trusted?"

"Even if this is true," said Mrs. Wrenshaw firmly, "who shall say that your tenderness and the happiness of his home might not have preserved him from further temptation? But, Hester, how did your husband reply to this charge?"

Hester looked up bewildered.

"I do not understand you," she said; "my husband was not present when Mr. Goldsmith told me this."

"Yes, but on your return home, when you repeated to him what you had heard."

"I said nothing to him, aunt Hester; I left him as soon as possible afterwards."

Mrs. Wrenshaw drew back with the sudden

repugnance with which we shrink from seeing the faults of those we love.

“Hester,” she said, in a tone of such deep feeling that her niece raised herself in fully wakened attention, “do you know what you have done? You have not shown your husband as much mercy as is vouchsafed to the worst criminals; in the pride of your own judgment, you have condemned him unheard.”

Hester started to her feet.

“You are mistaken,” she said, harshly; “I have not entirely condemned him till I have seen Captain Fortescue.”

“Do not wait for that, my dear child, as you value your future happiness, but hasten back to Uplands; if your uncle were here, he would tell you better than I can, that we do not trust in Mr. Goldsmith, or believe him to be quite an honest man. I have never seen your husband, but from what you tell me of his conduct during these three years, both to his wife and child, I am inclined to believe him the best man of the two. Does he go to church, Hester?”

She blushed deeply, as her aunt’s meaning flashed upon her.

"I believe he thinks far more about all those things than I do, since he has seen so much of Mr. King, our clergyman ; but I don't see any use in it, if he has been deceiving me all the time."

"Why will you not force yourself to believe him innocent? to me it seems plain that he is so; are you sure that you do not really think so too, only you cannot bear to own that your judgment has been in fault." Hester shook her head, but her aunt went on: "I think you are in too agitated a state to return at present; if you will be guided by me, you will write at once to your husband, entreating him to pardon your harsh unforgiveness and headstrong wilfulness. Oh, Hester if you love him still, and I think you do, can it be difficult to make any sacrifice to produce such happiness as you have never yet had in marriage? I have known the truest happiness for twenty years, and I tell you that no other earthly joy can weigh against it for a moment. Think what you are risking; how do you know that your husband will forgive you, if you insult him by persisting in this doubt of his honour?"

Frederic's parting look and words came back to Hester then.

"He does not know I doubt his honour now, and he loves me too well not to forgive me," she said dreamily, and then stood thinking.

Mrs. Wrenshaw did not interrupt her; she earnestly hoped that a stronger Power than hers would yet bring this unhappy, erring pair together again, although Hester's conduct was incomprehensible to her gentler nature.

After a while Hester said,—

"I cannot go back till I have seen Captain Fortescue; you do not understand how full of doubt I am. He was with my husband during that visit to London, and he could not have deceived him; besides Mr. Goldsmith said Captain Fortescue knew everything. If he will tell me this is false, then I will believe Mr. Goldsmith is a dishonest man, and he can no longer have the direction of our affairs. I will consent to wait till my uncle's return; I am sure he will see matters as I do. Do not feel angry with me, aunt Hester," she said, as her aunt turned sadly away. "I love and respect you for all you have said, and I will think of it, but I have never found myself wrong yet. It is very hard to feel that I have been so now; you must give me time."

CHAPTER XVI.

A TRUE FRIEND.

MRS. WRENSHAW looked earnestly at Hester when she came in to breakfast next morning, but she saw no signs of relenting in her contracted forehead and tightly-compressed lips. Poor girl! her head ached, and her whole soul was weary; she longed for peace, but she could not bring herself to see, among the tangled skein her own self-will and self-love had meshed around her, the only clue (for humility generally keeps itself like its emblem, the violet, out of sight) which would have led her safely to her rest.

All through the day she continued in a restless silence; the only allusion her aunt ventured to make to the subject was by asking her if she meant to write to England. "Not yet," was the hard, repelling answer, and Mrs. Wrenshaw felt it was

best to leave her to herself; she could pray for her, but she saw that further discussion would do more harm than good.

She thought her husband might return on the evening of the next day, and she told Hester so on the following morning.

"If he does not, aunt Hester, I can wait no longer," was her abrupt reply.

There had been rain on the previous day, so that they had only taken a quiet evening walk up the street in which their hotel was situated, one end of which joined the *jetée*, and the other stretched away into the high road beyond the town. But this morning, as there was broad sunshine, and all looked bright and tempting out-of-doors, Mrs. Wrenshaw proposed a walk: she thought it would be of use to Hester, and divert her thoughts from their fixed melancholy. She had shopping to do, she said, and they would go to the market and buy some flowers before the sun faded them.

They had bought several bouquets made of mignonette and clove carnations edged with a profusion of jasmine, arranged with exquisite taste, and they were just turning into the

milliner's, who, having heard already of the beautiful English lady, was delighted beyond measure to see her enter, when Hester, who was following her aunt, looked round, and started suddenly.

Standing close beside her, in conversation with a French gentleman, was Captain Fortescue.

Her aunt looked back for her, but Hester did not move or speak—she seemed spell-bound.

His friend soon left him, and Fortescue was moving on quickly when she sprang forward, uttering his name. He turned, and mechanically raised his hat, but he evidently did not recognize her.

“Will you wait for me one moment?” She spoke hurriedly, and then, joining her aunt, asked her if she would at once return to the hotel with her, or if she should take Captain Fortescue there alone.

Poor Mrs. Wrenshaw was frightened. She had so hoped all would have gone on quietly until her husband's return, but when she looked in Hester's face, she saw there was no chance of delay.

Excusing herself to the disappointed, expectant

milliner, she followed Hester, who had already recalled herself to Fortescue's memory, and asked him to accompany her home.

As he walked beside her, it seemed difficult for him to believe this beautiful, lofty-mannered woman the Hester Hallam of three years ago, and Fortescue felt that what had been to him her greatest charm—her fresh *naïveté*—was gone for ever.

She seemed to have grown ten years older, and, beautiful as she was, he thought the expression of her face too firm and decided for that of a woman.

Mrs. Wrenshaw placed herself quietly near one of the windows as soon as they reached their room, and Hester, without pausing to seat herself or to request her companion to do so, asked him abruptly if he remembered meeting her husband in London in the previous year.

"Perfectly," he said, rather surprised by her earnest manner; "and, Mrs. Hallam, I ought to compliment you on the change matrimony has wrought in him," and he smiled.

She looked impatient.

"Stop, Captain Fortescue; this is no time for

idle compliments. I have been told that you knew that my husband was betting deeply at that time, and had much involved himself in debt."

He started in such utter and unfeigned surprise that she could not doubt him.

"Your husband—and, Mrs. Hallam, I would stake my life upon his honour—told me most positively when I last saw him that he had entirely ceased to bet since he had lived at Uplands, and owed no man anything. Stay," he added, as a dark suspicion awakened, "who told you this, Mrs. Hallam? As my name was called in question, I have a right to ask."

"Mr. Goldsmith told me," she said; her heart was beating so wildly with hope and fear that she could scarcely stand without support, and she grasped at the back of a chair.

Fortescue saw her agitation; he began to understand that something serious lay under this, to him, unnatural conduct on a wife's part.

"You had better sit down, Mrs. Hallam," he said, kindly; he looked across at Mrs. Wrenshaw, who was sitting behind her niece, but so far off as not to mingle in the conversation; but she only

shook her head, as if to say she had better not speak.

He seated himself, and Hester followed his example mechanically.

"I expected that only such an unprincipled scoundrel could have coined such a falsehood. When I last saw my dear friend Hallam," he felt just then a double love for the man who seemed to be abandoned by his wife, and a wife who he felt sure was deeply loved by him; "I also saw Goldsmith, and he tried to make me believe the story you have mentioned; but you will excuse me if I say I was not so ready of belief, and I was so convinced that Goldsmith meant ill to your husband, that before I left town I wrote to him at Uplands, urging him to be on his guard and to have the state of your property clearly ascertained; I never received an answer to that letter. Perhaps, as I left town soon after, it may have gone astray; I only hope mine fulfilled its purpose.

Thought upon thought, memory on memory, crowded upon Hester till mental sight was blinded, and all was darkness. She looked vacantly at Fortescue, and pressed one hand on her fore-

head, as if she were seeking the key of this mystery.

“But what,” she said at last, slowly and painfully, “could have been his motive in slandering my husband to me?”

“I cannot tell, there might be many reasons ; it is better, far better, Mrs. Hallam, that I should not know any details. Of one thing I am quite sure : if, as from your manner I fear, there has been no explanation with Goldsmith, you ought not to lose a moment in returning to England, and urging your husband to take legal advice in the matter. I believe your presence is absolutely necessary for this, or I would offer to go to England for you, as I could travel faster than it would be well for you to do. I am not speaking without warrant ; since I left London things have come to my knowledge which make me sure that Goldsmith is not to be trusted, that he is a ruined man ; but,” he added, suddenly looking full at her, “as I said before, I would venture my life on your husband’s honour, and his love for his wife and child.”

The words were spoken involuntarily in strong indignation against the woman who could trust

the words of so false a man as he deemed the lawyer, uttered against her husband's good faith, for although he was of course ignorant of much, he could broadly guess the main facts of what had happened.

"You wrote to warn my husband," she said, as if thinking aloud. "Yes—yes—your letter must have come when our child was ill, and, doubtless, Fred threw it aside, scarcely taking in its contents. I see you blame me, Captain Fortescue, and you are right; but it was hard to believe a man faithless in whom my father placed such implicit trust, and who had not deceived me."

Crushed as she was by this revelation, it had not yet done its work; like all unimpulsive natures, she was slow to receive impressions, and she could not bear to see her fault or to own it.

Fortescue bit his lip; it was not his place to teach her; once before, when his feelings for her were far different, he had been sufficiently rebuked for interference; besides, there was her aunt to advise her. So he suppressed the answer that he longed to make, for she roused his deep indignation.

"If I can be of any service to you in the business, for Hallam's sake, do not scruple to

employ me;" then, seeing that she took no notice, he went up to Mrs. Wrenshaw, and begged her earnestly to hasten her niece's departure. "She scarcely realises how much depends upon it," he whispered, and, taking a formal leave of Hester, he departed, wondering at the change years had brought, and thinking how utterly miserable such a woman must make both her husband and herself, spite of all attractions of mind and person, for he was not a man to have considered her fortune one of Hester's charms—if he had married, it would have been for happiness, not money.

And then he thought of Fred, and wondered how much misery he had known; and amid all came the bitter remembrance that he had been the means of introducing him to Goldsmith.

CHAPTER XVII.

ALMOST CONQUERED.

LONG after Fortescue had left her, Hester remained in the same dull stupor. Reaction had at length succeeded to the over-excitement and agitation of the past week, and she was for some time literally unable to rouse herself.

At first Mrs. Wrenshaw left her quiet, but when for more than an hour she had remained in the same silent, motionless attitude, she bent over her and kissed her, stroking her fair hair with a soft, caressing movement.

But no tears came, she only sighed heavily.

At last she took her aunt's hand, and kissed it quietly.

"You see you were right, aunt Hester, and I was wrong. You, who are good and humble, cannot tell what it costs me to say this. For-

give me! I would not listen to your gentle persuasion, and Captain Fortescue was determined I should be convinced. He did not spare me. Well," she added, drawing herself up, "I suppose he had a right to be angry. He has been a true friend where I have been faithless; believing when I doubted; but then he has never been deceived. Now, do not look sad, aunt Hester; I have learned a lesson to-day which will keep me from hard judgment and doubt for a long time to come. I will go back to Fred to-morrow."

"God bless you, my dear, dear child," said her aunt, who could not control her tears, and she drew Hester fondly to her as she whispered, "And you will ask his forgiveness, will you not, my darling, for all that has gone before?"

Hester drew back.

"I will not deceive you," she said. "I have been wrong to take any one's word against my husband, without giving him the opportunity of justifying himself, and wrong to leave him as I did. I see this plainly now, and for this I will ask his pardon as earnestly as you could wish; but stay," she continued, as her aunt again kissed her, in the fulness of her joy, "I know you will

not be satisfied when you have heard all, and yet I cannot help it. I cannot see that I have been to blame in estranging myself from him for what he did at first. He had sinned deeply against me. You surely do not mean to say that I was to trust him at once, as if he had never proved himself unworthy——”

“There is no use in arguing about bygones, Hester; but, as you ask me, I think in your place, and loving your husband as you did once, I should have felt unable to give up the hope of winning his love by the fervour and strength of my own. It is very difficult for one person to judge for another in matters of feeling, as we are none of us alike; but I am quite sure you were wrong to nourish resentment during three years; and I think, dearest, you would lay a surer foundation for future happiness if you could think you needed pardon for it.”

“I cannot be a hypocrite,” said Hester, turning away. “I am willing to weigh that against his first deceit, and consider them both cancelled; I cannot promise more, and, indeed, I think, aunt Hester, we may be happy now.”

“God grant you may,” said her aunt.

She turned round and kissed Mrs. Wrenshaw more warmly than she had yet done, and her aunt tried to feel satisfied there was no use in urging her further. God's mercy alone, she thought, could fully soften that proud heart, and in His own good time, she doubted not that it would be done. In the meantime, her own heart overflowed with thankfulness at the prospect of this speedy reconciliation, for from what Hester had said of her husband, she believed he would be satisfied with any, the slightest, atonement on her part. It was strange to Mrs. Wrenshaw when she thought of her previous feelings to Frederic Hallam, and of the warm love which had suddenly sprung up in her heart towards him.

It seemed to Hester now as if to-morrow morning would never come. She rang for Françoise, and superintended her packing with an interest that surprised that active, but sorely disappointed damsel. She had a great mind to turn restive, and refuse to return to England, for she had already found several attractions at Nardes; but Hester was not a mistress to be trifled with: besides, she kept her so constantly employed, that she had no leisure even to specu-

late on the advantages and disadvantages of such a plan.

Night came at last, and for the first time since she left England, Hester slept soundly ; and she looked so different next morning, that her aunt congratulated her on her improved appearance.

She was in much brighter spirits too ; she had not written to Frederic, she said ; she should telegraph her arrival in England, and ask him to meet her at the Uplands station. At first she had thought of waiting for him in London, but as she could travel home by a shorter route across country, she thought it might be better for them before they took any decided steps with regard to Goldsmith to talk the matter over at Uplands ; for Mrs. Wrenshaw urged upon her the prudence of not giving the lawyer any warning of her purpose. She did not scruple to tell her niece, that after what Captain Fortescue had said, she believed Goldsmith had purposely alienated her from her husband, in order to possess undivided control over her money, and then Hester remembered it was not till after she had desired him to purchase Uplands, that he had warned her against Fred.

Before she started, came a note from Captain

Fortescue, offering, if he could be of any service, to accompany her to England.

Hester smiled faintly.

"No," she said to Mrs. Wrenshaw, "he means well, but I had rather be alone. I have much to think about before I reach Uplands. You will answer him for me, will you not, aunt Hester?"

One of Françoise's admirers was a waiter at the other hotel, and it soon transpired among the daily group of idlers, that the beautiful Mrs. Hallam was already leaving Nardes. Monsieur Simon was in gloomy despair. He had composed three verses of his poëm, but the other two were restive: the ideas, as he told a friend whom he was holding tightly by the arm—were ready, were there, in fact, and he touched his forehead; but they were too grand, too magnificent to be restricted in conventional metre. He thought he must write it all over again in Alexandrines, and then seeing his friend smile, he crossed his arms gloomily over his chest, and drooped his chin upon them.

"You do not sympathize—you are not poet."

"No, *Dieu merci*, I am not; but still I understand what you mean. Pluck up courage, man;

you're not the first by scores, who has found his brains larger than his tongue was glib. Let us go and see the last of your inspiration, it will freshen you up perhaps."

And when Hester stepped on to the deck of the steamer, she found herself surrounded by her admirers, who bowed an enthusiastic farewell.

Mrs. Wrenshaw would gladly have accompanied her to England, but she was now in hourly expectation of her husband's arrival, and she could not leave Nardes without his consent.

"Good-by'e, aunt," Hester said, as they finally parted, "you have been very good to me. Sometimes I think that if I had the reverence for my husband that you have for yours, I might be a happier woman."

The white cliffs were soon in sight, and Hester's heart beat quicker and quicker, with a joyful anticipation she no longer tried to subdue, though it seemed so strange, so new to her, to indulge any loving or tender feeling towards her husband, that she could scarcely persuade herself it was not wrong to yield freely to it. Hitherto in returning home, it had been Ralphie whose greet-

ing she had thought over and longed for : now the child's image was almost obliterated beside the father's, grown so suddenly dear ; for she hardly yet owned to herself that she had never ceased to love him, although she had tried her utmost to stifle her love.

She telegraphed to Uplands before she took her seat in the train, which must now in a few hours bring her to her husband. She seemed to have lost all her usual calmness ; she consulted her watch constantly, and even put it to her ear, thinking it must have stopped.

Time went on slowly.

But as she approached nearer and nearer home, this excited joy subsided—there was her promise to her aunt, and Hester's rigid honour felt that, in all the rapture of meeting, it must be fulfilled.

She must explain her conduct to her husband, and ask his forgiveness for it. She wished now she had written from Nardes—but she had told him he would not hear from her for a week, and she had waited in the hope of seeing Fortescue first—a letter would have spared so much.

Supposing Fred had guessed, or in any way learned the truth, was deeply offended by her

doubt, and received her coldly—sternly. She knew she could not humble herself before him—and then what would happen. She almost wished she could return again to Nardes, and write him all, and then his anger would be over before she reached Uplands. What could have made her such a coward? And then she thought of the parting look her husband had given her. No, he would not be stern or cold, although he might be deeply grieved that she could have doubted him. She half wished she had not made the promise. She believed so strongly now in her husband's love for her, that she felt she need only throw herself into his arms, and tell him she loved him, and all would be well, and he would never require an explanation of her conduct. But she had given the promise, and she must keep it, and she should keep it fairly and honourably, without taking advantage of Fred's affection. She should tell him at once ; before she confessed her love for him, he should hear of her fault.

Even yet she thought more of herself than of her husband.

The train sped on and on, and the movement renewed her excitement. Sometimes she felt as

if the engine must be stopped at once, that she might have leisure to dwell more calmly on what was before her; and then again she wished that several hours' journey still lay between her and her home. If she had had more time, she should be better able to judge exactly what she ought to do.

How apt we all are to forecast words and actions, never considering that all is over-ruled for us, and will be—if we only strive to act rightly, without in any way considering self—what is best.

At length, and as it seemed to Hester, sooner than she expected, and before her mind was decided, they reached the station. Her heart beat as if it would suffocate her.

She put her head out of the carriage window, and looked eagerly round—there was no one on the platform but some porters and the station-master. He did not see Mrs. Hallam, but beckoned to Martin as he got out, and taking him into a corner, talked with him for a few minutes.

Hester waited impatiently till Martin came up.

“What is it?” she said. “Where is your master?”

“ He has not come himself to meet you, ma’am,” said the man, touching his hat; “ but your pony-carriage is here already.”

She felt greatly disappointed. She had so counted on seeing Fred’s face the moment she arrived; still it was a sort of reprieve, she had been thinking how painful it would be to delay her explanation, and yet she could not have made it till they reached home.

Martin asked if he should drive her, thinking she might feel fatigued after the journey, but she took the reins, saying it would do her good, and was soon going fast towards Uplands.

The road lay up the steep hill mentioned at the beginning of the volume; but instead of taking the bridle path, indicated by the finger-post, the carriage-way took a more circuitous route; descending the hill, and making a long sweep to the left, it arrived in a broad level road at the great iron gates, at the foot of the chesnut avenue.

This gate was visible a long way off, and the vane on the lodge glittered in the bright afternoon sun, making it look nearer than it was. The sunlight dazzled Hester’s eyes as she strained them eagerly, in the hope that Fred

might be waiting for her at the entrance gates. The weather had become much hotter since the morning: a few butterflies flew lazily from one sprig in the hedge to another; the gnats singing their sharp chorus louder than ever, and the green and blue dragon-flies flying in their singular angles, and coming upon you when you least expected them, were the only things that seemed to rejoice in it. The ponies were almost maddened by the swarm of flies that followed their course.

Hester screened her eyes once more with her hand, and this time she fancied she saw some one by the gate.

The next moment she smiled at her own folly in imagining she could distinguish persons at such a distance. If there were any one, it was probably the lodge-keeper. Fred would be sure to bring Ralphie to meet her, and he would not bring him beyond the gates, out of the shadow of the trees in such blazing sunshine, for although the beams were becoming horizontal, the heat was still intense.

The white dust—the soil was chalky in this road—flew up in clouds, as the ponies, feeling themselves in sight of home and of freedom from

the stings of their tormenters, dashed along at full speed—it was almost blinding, and made Hester long to be under the cool green shade of the avenue.

She could not see clearly before her for the dust now; but as she reached the gates she knew that there was some one awaiting her, besides the old lame man who kept the lodge.

The gates were wide open, and the ponies went on rapidly, but Hester pulled them in and forced them to stop. Martin was at their heads in a moment.

She looked round.

Coming up to her from the gates were little Ralphie, Parkins, and Bevis.

Where was her husband?

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHAT HAPPENED AT DRIVEN STATION.

ON the morning that Frederic Hallam left Uplands, with the intention of visiting Kirton's Farm, Jacob Bonham set out on his daily round in a more serious mood than usual.

Ever since Miss Hallam's visit to Stedding, he had remarked a depression in Lucy's spirits; she was cheerful; it would have been difficult to Lucy to be otherwise, so blessed was she with the habit of only seeing the best side of things; but the old dreaming fits, which the cares of house and children seemed to have almost banished, had returned, and with them a tendency to sigh, which Jacob thought marriage had cured.

On the previous evening he had spoken to her about this, and she had confessed to him that, from little hints Miss Hallam had let fall, and much

more from what old Biz had seen and commented on, that Hester was not happy with her husband.

"And, Jacob," she said, bursting into tears, "you cannot think how I feel for her. She had such a joyless, dull childhood compared to mine; she knew so little love; and now, darling, to think of her being disappointed in the greatest of all human happiness, is more than I can bear."

Jacob drew her closer to him and kissed her; they were walking up and down their garden in the cool, dim evening light.

"But, dearest, I understand that your loving little heart—no, it's not a little heart, is it? it's a large full heart, which would love all the world if the world would only let it—I can quite understand that this seems hard to you, as you always want every one to be as happy as yourself; but, in the first place, you have no certain proof and, in the next, Hester has put it quite out of your power to help her."

"Ah, but that's it," said Lucy, looking up at her husband; "it seemed right to give way to you at the time, hard as it was; but I have been thinking lately, that you were so angry with Hester for paining me, and seeming to throw back

my affection, that perhaps you did not judge as calmly as you usually do about things, and that if I had persevered, we might still have been friends."

"Then, really," said her husband, trying to smile her into a happier mood, "you have been grieving not to have been a more self-willed little woman than you usually are, which I consider a very superfluous regret; in fact, making a little goose of yourself."

Lucy shook her head.

"I can't laugh about it, dearest; it haunts me too much. You don't know Hester so well as I do. I was a dreamy, unrecollected, wild, unobservant creature, before I married you; but I always had what you call my quick insight into people's characters, and you can scarcely imagine the reserve of Hester's. I have thought a great deal over what old Biz has told me. She says Hester is haughty and proud and cold, and as grand as a queen; and that she never smiles, and seemed to avoid speaking of Mr. Hallam or of old times; and, joining this to Miss Hallam's unkind remarks, I feel sure my cousin is not happy. Now, Jacob, any woman must be happy whose husband loves

her, whatever else may happen; and I believe that, instead of her having shrunk from us all from pride—it has been—well, it has been pride—but of an excusable kind: she could not bear our pity.”

“But still, Lucy, I cannot see how you could have prevented this.”

“Yes, Jacob; if I had persuaded you to let me write to her again and again, I should have conquered her at last. No one can resist affection when they are longing for it, and this must be the case with the poor thing, if matters are as I fear. If I had written, perhaps, she would have come to see us, or, at any rate, to Kirton’s Farm; and who knows, seeing us two so happy might have made Mr. Hallam fonder of her; now, you needn’t laugh and call me romantic; you know I’m very often right about love.”

“You’re almost always right, are you not?” said Jacob; “and now it’s supper-time.”

But, though through the rest of the evening he kept his wife’s attention too cheerfully amused for her to return to the subject, it weighed upon him during his morning’s drive.

He could not feel comfortable or altogether

blameless; he remembered and understood more clearly now, his dread lest his wife should persevere in her entreaties to keep up a friendship with her cousin; he remembered also the secrecy he had on that account maintained about Peter's hint of the Hallam's intention of living at Kirton's Farm—his fear that, if Lucy persevered in writing to Hester, it might become impossible to the latter to resist the longing to renew former ties and associations. Why had he feared and shrunk from all this?

Jacob was a far better man now than when he married Lucy Wrenshaw; is not any man the better for living with and loving a good, religious woman? He had learned to look into his own heart and to be humbled by the sight of the hitherto unknown Evil there; he had learned to make the passive Good there act, and had, at any rate, made the active Evil passive, if he had not yet succeeded in uprooting it—a combat in which some of us may not triumph till the hour of death.

He was not so likely to be blinded by self-deceit now as on the night when he had determined to separate Lucy from her cousin; and

a quick flush of shame burned on his cheek, as his then unworthy motives—started into sight. Was it too late to make atonement—too late to see if his sweet, loving wife might not be of use to Hester? He feared that if she wrote to her cousin now, it might seem as if she were courting her because she was rich, and it was hard for independent Jacob, who had never owed anything in his life to any man, to make up his mind to this.

But soon his conscience reminded him that he had just now wished the past undone; there could be no atonement without a sacrifice, and it would be better to bear even this stigma than not to make one effort towards reconciliation. Lucy had written once since to congratulate her cousin on Ralphie's birth; but the letter had been altered at his instigation into a formal, lifeless epistle, little likely to win Hester.

He roused himself, and found his horse had sunk into a dull, leisurely trot, very unlike his usual pace, for Jacob had rarely driven carelessly since his memorable upset in "the Copse Bit." He thought of it now as he caught himself "mooning," with the reins in his hands, and

wondered what Lucy would say when she heard of it.

“And I have a stiff day’s work before me, too,” said the doctor; “no time for loitering.”

He reached the common he was bound for, and, giving his horse to a ragged boy to hold, made his way to a group of squalid-looking huts inhabited by turf-cutters.

There were scores of children here, all suffering from that scourge of infancy—whooping-cough—which rarely leaves the healthiest child as it found him, and lays the seeds of disease and death in so many where it does not itself destroy.

It must have required a large stock of patience to listen to the complaints of these ignorant mothers, who were all far more ready to accuse the doctor for the slow progress towards recovery than to thank him for any alleviation his skill had procured their suffering little ones; and also it required considerable forbearance to find that his best remedies had in many cases been neglected and set aside for the nostrums of some old crone, who passed for a “wise woman” in the locality.

But Jacob was used to this, and, though he could speak sternly where he saw neglect, or

anything decidedly injurious to the patients, he generally had a kind word and a cheerful smile for all.

He had settled with Lucy to alter their dinner-hour and wait till six, as there was death in the house where he usually dined when on these long excursions, and he naturally avoided going there, so that by the time he reached Driven Station on his way home, he was tired out, and exhausted.

There was a man waiting at the corner where the road branched off to the station; he touched his hat, and Jacob saw that it was Peter Stasson.

"What is it, Peter?" he said, checking his horse; "nothing the matter at the Farm, is there?"

He earnestly hoped there was not, for he was far too tired and hungry to wish to return upon his road.

"Nothing at the Farm, doctor," said Peter, looking very serious; "but you be wanted up yon', bad enough," he jerked his thumb over his shoulder towards the station.

The man's manner puzzled Bonham, there was a sort of mystery about it.

He drove up the little ascent, and then waited till Peter came to hold the horse

“Where do you mean, Peter?”

“Here, sir,” said the man; “but I want to speak a word first. There was a gentleman in the 3. train, as had booked his ticket for Driven Station; but he was so bad when he got here, that he could neither speak nor stand; he just said, ‘Kirton’s Farm,’ and they sent a boy down for me; and, to the best of my belief, sir, it’s Muss Heaster’s husband.”

In a moment, Jacob was in the little waiting room, and there, extended on as many chairs as they could find, a railway rug rolled under his head, was Frederic Hallam. Bonham had never seen him distinctly, but he felt sure from all he had heard that Peter was right in his conjecture.

He was not quite unconscions, but seemed in great suffering. He evidently knew that Jacob was a doctor, and seemed to be relieved by his presence.

Bonham stood meditating for some minutes after he had felt Hallam’s pulse, and looked at him attentively, and then he walked out of hearing,

and beckoned to the station-master to follow him.

“ You sleep here, don’t you ? ”

“ Well, doctor, and what’s that to do with it? you don’t think I’ve got accommodation for a sick man, do ye ? ”

“ No,” said Jacob ; “ but I suppose you don’t mind lending me a pillow, if you have one ? ”

The man grumbled, but after a bit, he produced a pillow, dirty certainly, but soft enough for Jacob’s purpose.

With a broken chair and the pillow he managed to make a reclining seat in the gig for the sick man, so that his head was supported, and then, with the help of the two men, he lifted him in, and telling Peter he was going to take Mr. Hallam to his own house for the present, he drove gently away.

At first he had felt strangely puzzled how to act. He feared that Hallam was on the brink of a serious illness, and he dared not incur the risk of taking him the long journey back to Uplands; besides, there was no train again till late in the evening, as that by which Hallam had meant to return had started while he lay ill and half unconscious before Jacob’s arrival.

He knew that the sick man had no friends in Stedding: it must be his duty to take him home, even at the risk of the illness proving infectious. He would have done as much for a stranger similarly circumstanced, for the county hospital was miles away, but Hallam had a double claim upon him, he was Lucy's cousin by marriage.

The air revived the sufferer: he was able to say a few words to Bonham, and when they reached the surgery, with Jacob's help and his assistant's, he walked to the parlour.

Making him lie down on the sofa, Jacob went in search of Lucy.

She was full of thankfulness that her husband should have been, as it were, sent that way in a time of such need, and had soon a bedroom ready close to their own. The children she sent at once to her mother's, telling Jacob she should go round in the afternoon and arrange for their remaining there, as she meant to nurse Mr. Hallam herself.

By the next day his symptoms had become so much more alarming, that Bonham, without waiting any longer for Hester, to whom they had at once written and despatched a telegraphic

message, sent for a doctor from London, not choosing, although he felt competent to manage the case himself, to take the entire responsibility.

Next morning brought the doctor, but no letter or message from Uplands. However, by an early train arrived a servant with clothes for Mr. Hallam, and a letter from Parkins.

She would have come herself, she said, to nurse her master, but she dared not leave the child, or take him so long a journey without his parents' leave; besides, he was best away from a sick house. She then told them of Hester's sudden departure for France, adding that she had forwarded Mr. Bonham's letter and message to Arden, *poste restante*, as she did not know that her mistress had left any more definite address. She was sure she would return at once, and she had written at the same time to say that Mr. Hallam was at Stedding, and with whom.

She added that no letter had come from Mrs. Hallam since her departure.

Jacob and Lucy looked at each other with sad, perplexed faces. Hallam was far too ill to be spoken to, or questioned on the subject. The doctor had entirely approved of Bonham's treat-

ment, but had cautioned them that any excitement would make the delirious wandering from which he suffered during the night, continual and probably violent. Jacob had sat up in his room the previous night, and had been moved almost to tears by the fond endearing terms in which Hallam implored Hester to return to him, and be again the wife she was when he married her, and his earnest entreaties to forgive him, and give up her coldness, and show her real feelings for him.

There was much mingled in broken snatches that Jacob could not understand: allusions to Ralphie, who, he seemed to think, was with him also. And then he would start up suddenly, urging Hester to go to the child, who needed her more than he did. Then he would talk of Kirton's Farm, and Goldsmith.

Jacob had not mentioned this to Lucy; he knew how it would distress her, and, after all, from what he had seen of delirium, a great deal of it might be imaginary. But Parkins's letter confirmed his worst suspicions, he feared Hester had left her husband in anger—perhaps for ever.

They were in the dressing-room which led into

Hallam's chamber. Jacob softly closed the door between.

"You feel sad and anxious, Lucy, and so do I; but you must keep up a cheerful heart, and put on a bright face, or you are no fit nurse for Mr. Hallam. He is in that state when the slightest rousing of thought or attention may do terrible mischief, and for that reason, sad as your cousin's absence seems at such a time, I am thankful to be spared her sudden appearance among us just yet. Although dreadfully weakened, neither R—— nor I fear this actual illness so much as the consequences which sometimes internally result from it, and these may come almost without a warning."

"But then, surely, I ought to write to Hester?"

"By all means, and write as strongly as possible to urge her return; but in an obscure foreign town like Arden, letters often miscarry, and I was thinking whether we ought not to send for some of Mr. Hallam's own family."

"I can ask the Ainsworths about them, but, I believe, of near relations, there are only his mother and his aunt. Mrs. Hallam, I know, is in Switzerland; Miss Hallam told me she had either gone, or

was just going, when she was in Stedding. I suppose the Ainsworths know where she went to from them? But, Jacob, don't you think we are better without her?"

For Lucy, like any other good nurse, had a horror of help and conflicting opinions in a sick room, and she had seen enough of Miss Hallam to know that she would be very obstinate in her opinions.

"We must not think about ourselves, dearest; we have no right to keep his relations away from him."

"Not even if they do him harm? Jacob, that woman's silly little laugh would destroy me if I were ill."

"Perhaps not if she were your aunt, and you were used to her. I promise you that I will keep guard over Miss Hallam when she arrives, and if I think she is injudicious or interfering, I will forbid her in the sick man's room. You forget my authority there is indisputable."

Lucy was not convinced, but she yielded and returned to her post, striving to keep her thoughts from dwelling on Hester's absence from her husband, and her extraordinary silence.

Sometimes when he seemed awake and conscious, or when taking medicine or food from her, Hallam's eyes rested on her face with a searching inquiring expression, and his lips moved as if about to question; but he was too weak, and soon relapsed into the sort of listless waking dream in which his days passed.

When Mrs. Frank Wrenshaw came that afternoon to give her daily report of the children's health, Lucy asked her to go to Mrs. Ainsworth, and ascertain, if possible, where Miss Hallam was to be found.

But Mrs. Frank shook her head. She dearly loved any excuse for getting sole and undivided possession of her grandchildren, and letting them enact as much small mischief as children usually delight in committing when they are certain of applause, although Mrs. Frank would have been virtuously severe on the like misdemeanours in any one else's grandchildren than her own. Still, spite of the privilege thereby enjoyed, she thought Jacob's conduct Quixotic. What had Mr. Hallam or Hester ever done for Lucy that she should take to nursing a stranger, and turn her house into a hospital?

"Of course Jacob knows best, my dear: in your opinion he always does; but I should have thought it was doing quite enough to take Mr. Hallam in, without having his whole family."

"But, mamma, it's only Miss Hallam."

"Well, and I thought you didn't much like her when she was here. I know, when I said I thought she was a nice kind of body, only nervous—and that would be very bad in a sick-room—you looked as if you didn't agree with me. However, I suppose you know your own affairs best. About the children, they can stay as long as they like and welcome. You mustn't be angry with little Lucy, either, only, perhaps, it's better to tell you—but while I was playing with Baby this morning—when Faith's upstairs helping Rachel, I look after them—the little mite whipped up my scissors and cut Alice's front hair short to her head, and when I told her she mustn't touch scissors—they were naughty, sharp things that would hurt little girls—she answered, in her pretty little sedate way, that she knew that, for she'd been cutting pussy's hair first, and so she has—a great square patch right off the poor thing's back; it was enough to make one

die of laughing to think of such a mite being so clever and knowing."

Lucy involuntarily pressed her hand over her eyes.

"Ah, mother, she is too little to be trusted with scissors, indeed she is."

"Ah, my dear, that's just what I said; but you may depend it's not the first time she's had them, or she wouldn't be so apt at using them. Well, well, she is a forward young chit; but I'll go now, and bring you word about poor Mr. Hallam's aunt."

Lucy earnestly wished at that moment for Miss Hallam's presence, which would give her liberty to watch a little over her children. She did not doubt her mother's care; but she knew that her love for babies was so intense that she was apt to forget the presence of the others when playing with her special darling, and her quick imagination suggested that Miss Lucy's next experiment might be tried on her sister's eye-lashes.

Mrs. Ainsworth was not sure of Miss Hallam's whereabouts; she had left them to spend a few days with some friends with whom she had promised to make a tour among the English lakes,

and thence, if fine weather lasted, to proceed to Scotland, so that there was no saying with any certainty where she was just then.

Jacob told his wife she could only write to the first address, and trust to the letter being forwarded ; it seemed strange that all near and dear to Hallam should be so widely scattered, but then, as he observed, " Londoners are never to be found in the autumn."

CHAPTER XIX.

TO STEDDING.

STANDING there in the chestnut avenue, with little Ralphie pressed closely to her bosom, Hester listened while Parkins sorrowfully told all she knew about her master's illness, partly gathered from Mrs. Bonham's letters, and partly from Mr. King the rector, who had been over to Stedding twice to see his friend, and was very anxious and down-hearted about him, Parkins said.

"Shall Martin go round for the rector at once, ma'am?" she continued; "for he said he was to be let know, directly you arrived."

Hester had stood in perfect silence, only pressing the child closer to her, but without a word or a caress; the sudden horror had numbed her senses; she roused now.

"No, I don't want Mr. King; I only want you, Parkins. I am going to Stedding at once."

The woman began to expostulate, but her words died away in an indistinct murmur, when she looked in her mistress's face, and again felt the irresistible sway of her resolute will.

Still holding the child, who looked wonderingly at her, with his deep earnest eyes, she stepped into the carriage again, and telling Parkins to get up behind, bade Martin drive to the house.

The movement pleased Ralphie, and unlocked his tongue from the surprise his mother's manner had caused.

"Where pap-pa?" he asked, inquiringly. "Poor pap-pa, all gone—all gone."

She was almost overpowered, but always accustomed to restrain emotion before others, the man's presence checked her tears.

As soon as they reached the house, she bade Martin not unharness the ponies, and then told Parkins to pack as quickly as she could, what was necessary for herself and the child, and to join her in the library.

"But oh, ma'am," said Parkins, imploringly, "you cannot travel again to-day; you are tired

out; you must be faint from hunger, too, and would you take Master Ralphie such a journey so late as this?"

"Hush," said Hester firmly; "I cannot consider him at such a time; we ought both to be at Stedding now, there has been delay enough;" then seeing how sad Parkins looked: "You may send me some wine," she said, "and some bread too; you are right, I must eat, I may want strength."

She still kept Ralphie in her arms, and as Parkins closed the door, she sank down in a chair, and holding him from her for an instant, gazed fixedly at him, as if she were striving to see his father's image in the lovely little face; then she caught him to her, and kissed him passionately again and again, till the child cried in fear at her strange wild manner.

"Ah, Ralphie, you are happy, you can cry; mamma's heart is breaking."

Parkins herself came in with the wine and bread, and Hester was calm in an instant. The servant told her mistress that it would be useless for them to start at present; there would be no train to Stedding before eight o'clock, and even then they should not arrive till after midnight. She ventured

another piteous look at Ralphie, but Hester took no notice of the appeal.

“It does not signify about waiting, Parkins, I shall start directly you are ready. I must telegraph to Mr. Bonham to announce my arrival; besides, I had rather be at the station than here.”

It seemed to her just then as if every moment spent in inaction were wilful delay; she thought she should not feel this so much at the station—a stage, as it were, on her journey. Besides it would be well that the Bonhams should be prepared for her coming by the telegram.

Calm and business-like in her plans as ever, even then.

But she let Martin drive now, and gave Ralphie in charge to Parkins; it seemed as if she must at last be alone.

Alone—had she not always been alone, although the strong fibres of her heart's love had once struck down deep into what they had fancied nourishing pasture; had they not withered among the stones and rubbish, instead of forming a firm lasting root?

Was she then to be alone for ever?

Was this her first cup of joy, for a weary time untasted, save in anticipation, to prove the bitterest

trial, the most impossible to bear of any grief yet laid upon her.

Some people, as blows fall one after another, —whether it be from some unseen comfort which takes the outward shape called resignation, or that skins thicken under the lash of misfortune; or that a consciousness of failings makes the punishment seem less than is deserved—grow used to troubles and trials, and only feel double joy, when any unforeseen and unexpected good comes like angel's visits, few and far between.

But with Hester it was not so.

She had resolved at last to humble her pride, to ask her husband to pardon her, and it seemed as if she had made atonement for her fault—it was very hard that this unutterable grief should be laid upon her, just when she had made up her mind to try and be more like her aunt Wrenshaw; a better, a more religious woman during the rest of her life.

These thoughts tossed and troubled through her mind, on the road to the station, over-topping, as it were, for the time the grief which had hitherto seared her heart completely, and pent up all its tears.

But it was only the foam cresting the waves, and obscuring them for a while, and, as it curled angrily forwards, bearing with it the tangled sea spoils, which had hitherto clouded and fouled the purity of the water beneath. . . .

The station-master told her she would have to wait a full hour and a half.

“Could she not have a special train?”

“You could have such, no doubt, and welcome from Stedding here, ma’am; but we’re not provided with them in these small places.”

She made no answer, except by telling him the message she wished sent to Jacob Bonham.

Till this was despatched there had been a motive for exertion. Now it seemed as if she must lose her senses in that dull, lonely place before the hour and a half had expired.

She went into the waiting-room, and took Ralphie from Parkins. A secret instinct made her feel that she was quieter, less rebellious with the child pressed close against her heart.

Ralphie shrank from her; he was sleepy and tired, and he had not forgotten his mother’s face in the library. Parkins, too, held him back.

“He grows heavy with sleep, ma’am, poor little dear; and you’re not used to nursing him.”

Just then the words struck Hester like a well-deserved reproach. She turned away abruptly out of the room, and paced up and down the platform.

There was still daylight, although it was a good hour darker than usual, the station-master said; the sun had set behind a dense bank of clouds, which in different shades of dark grey, looking like a huge mass of wrought iron, was fast spreading upward, gathering to itself every particle of vapour near, and infusing into it its own deepening hue.

Just then a porter lit the signal lamp, and a shrill whistle rang through the air.

Hester walked towards the approaching train, thankful for any outward distraction, in what seemed an endless monotony of waiting.

“The down train from London, ma’am,” the station-master said, in answer to her looks; “it stops here.”

The bell was rung, and in another few moments the renewed screech of the engine as it slackened speed, told that it was going to stop.

Four passengers alighted; two of them were labouring men, who had, probably, only come a short distance. But the others were gentlemen, and as one of them asked the station-master if his trap were not waiting, Hester recognized the voice of their neighbour Mr. Crathie.

She drew back quickly under the roof of the platform, where the light was by this time very indistinct, and seating herself in a corner, and pulling down her veil, felt sure she should escape observation. Just then she could not have spoken to Mr. Crathie.

The train had come in early, and the station-master brought word that there was no carriage waiting.

The two gentlemen walked up and down, talking in a low voice, and gradually drawing more under the shadow of the roof. They came so near to Hester now that she could hear what they said, but they were too deep in talk to notice her.

She paid no heed to them till the sound of her own name made her start and listen eagerly.

“Yes, they are the people who live at Uplands; a young married couple,” said Mr. Crathie; “that scoundrel had the management of the wife’s money;

she was an heiress. I wonder if they are at all prepared; if not, it will be a great shock. I suppose it will all be in the *Times* to-morrow."

"Certain to be. It is in to-night's papers," said his companion; "but if these people are friends of yours, I should let them know to-night or early to-morrow; they might by some chance miss it; and if this rascal Goldsmith had much to do with them, they should lose no time. Although, depend upon it, he is miles on his way across the Atlantic by this."

"I'll let them know at once—but come along," said Mr. Crathie; "there's my trap. Look alive, porter."

And while Hester still sate, breathless and stunned at what she had heard, they had left the station.

And this was the man she had trusted, to whom she had listened eagerly when he defamed her husband's honour. For the first time in all the trial she had been undergoing, Hester felt really humbled—crushed to the dust by the bitter proof of her error. So deep was her shame—for each moment that she reflected, Goldsmith's image seemed to blacken, and Fred's to become more

like an angel's in the truth of his love for her—that, spite of her care for wealth and power, the actual loss of fortune seemed a trifling evil, beside her sense of the deep wrong she had done her husband, and her longing to implore his pardon for it. This, then, was Goldsmith's motive in refusing to purchase Uplands; he was probably at that time a ruined man.

She had sate completely absorbed and insensible to all that was passing round her; but she felt now that some one was standing before her, trying to attract her notice.

She looked up—it was the station-master.

“I beg pardon, ma'am, but don't you think, seeing how the weather has turned, that I'd best send a porter up to the house for your close carriage. You won't think of travelling to-night, ma'am, will you?”

Hester started up. The stirring breeze was gone now, and the air felt hushed and still. During the last five minutes it had grown suddenly darker—except one broad band of green light on the horizon, the grey cloud-bank had overspread all the sky, and formed a lowering canopy—which, as Hester walked forwards to the edge of the

platform, seemed to bulge downwards over her head in a metallic-looking protuberance.

Before she could answer the man's question, a livid streak of forked lightning darted from it, and seemed to strike the rails at her feet. The station-master grasped her arm, and pulled her under the shelter of the roof, while an instantly following crash of thunder bellowed round them, and shook the little building.

Hester went in search of Ralphie. In general, lightning storms greatly affected his little sensitive frame; but now he was sleeping soundly. Poor Parkins was trembling with terror.

"Ah, ma'am, stay here, pray; don't leave me alone; pray don't, I shall die of fear. You'll go back home, won't you? Oh, ma'am, do, for mercy's sake! Oh! there again!" and another flash darted its ghastly light through the room.

"Hush," said Hester, gently, "it would be cruel to wake him now; I will make one of the men come and stay with you—this place stifles me."

Sending one of the porters in to Parkins, she returned to the edge of the platform, and stood looking at the sky.

There was a fainter flash, and the station-master said he hoped it was passing over; but the instantaneous crash that overpowered his words, showed he was mistaken. A moment's intense lull—then a jagged stream of blue flame leaped from the dark mass overhead, and seemed to strike the roof above them. The whole building rocked and the ground shook under their feet, even amid the awful roar of the thunder, there was a sound of falling timber.

Hester did not fall, but she felt faint and unable to move for several minutes. The station-master recovered himself sooner, and raising a lantern from the ground, ran rapidly along the front of the building. The day signal-pole, within twenty feet of where they were standing, had been shivered to pieces.

Hester saw it plainly, and even in that awful moment her thoughts were so fixed on the coming train, that she asked the man to look whether any of the fragments had been scattered over the rails.

"The train will be here directly, now," he said, and he ran to the signal-lamp, and turned it to "danger."

Another flash, and another, and before Hester

had returned from seeing if the uproar had wakened Ralphie, the engine came up ; the lightning flashes making it brightly visible for an instant, and leaving light enough to make its demon-like approach—screeching as if in harmony with the elements—awful. It seemed just then to Hester as if all evil powers were let loose to prevent her journey to Stedding, and she would not be conquered by them—no, though the storm should increase tenfold. If the train went on, she would go with it—and before Parkins had at all recovered from her terror, she found herself getting into one of the carriages, followed by her mistress.

The lightning flashes ceased for a few minutes, while the sky grew blacker and blacker. Some heavy drops fell, as if unwillingly, but they became more rapid and frequent, and soon the rain streamed down in torrents, which threatened to penetrate the roof of the carriage—it rattled strangely, too, against the windows, and was evidently charged with metallic pebbles.

“ Thank God, ma’am, the lightning’s over,” said Parkins. “ I’m sure, I thought as the last hour was upon us.”

As if by a spell her words seemed to have stirred nature to fresh strife. Flash succeeded flash, lighting up the carriage vividly for an instant, scarcely realized—before another still more lurid returned. The roar of the thunder was less tremendous; they probably heard it less, amid the whirr of their own movement and the dash of the rain against roofs and windows—and so, on they went through that fearful storm. Parkins, half dead with terror, and Hester insensible to peril from without, the agonized dread gnawing at her heart, that she might be, after all, too late.

There was war without and within. Only the little child slept peacefully through the sad night's journey.

CHAPTER XX.

CONQUERED.

It was past twelve when Hester reached Jacob Bonham's house. She sprang out of the fly and rang the bell herself, timidly, as if fearing whom she might awaken. She was utterly hopeless. The fatigue she had undergone, previous to the shock of the storm, had almost overpowered her. She felt that she was too late, and when Jacob opened the door himself, it seemed to her that it was but to break the tidings gently.

He took her hand, and she looked up in his face.

No, the worst was not come upon her; her husband still lived, or Jacob Bonham would not have had a smile upon his lips.

"You must come to Lucy first," he said. "Mr. Hallam is at present asleep, and may not be roused from it."

She looked wistfully at him.

“You shall see him presently ; but I must see you quite composed and quiet first. Is that your little boy ?” and he took Ralphie from poor exhausted Parkins.

He led the way towards the parlour, but Lucy’s arms were already round her cousin, and as she drew her in Jacob gently closed the door upon them, while he himself took Parkins and Ralphie to their room, and sent Mattie to get them all they wanted.

“Poor, poor darling !” sobbed Lucy.

The fond pressure, the fonder kiss, unlocked that oppressed, sorrow-laden heart. She broke away from Lucy, and threw herself on the sofa in such a paroxysm of agony as her cousin had never witnessed. But in heart Lucy was glad to see it ; she had so feared that all love was at an end between the husband and wife. As soon as Hester’s sobs became less frequent and her tears flowed in a more natural manner, she went up to her, and tried to soothe her with the best words her loving heart could prompt ; Hester seemed comforted ; she could not speak, but she kissed Lucy and looked inquiringly at her.

"He is very ill, dearest—so ill that Jacob telegraphed this afternoon again for Dr. —. He will be here to-morrow."

"Will *he* know me?" said Hester, so humbly and quietly that one could scarcely have imagined it herself that spoke.

She felt deeply humbled that Lucy, whom she had accustomed herself of late years to look down upon as an inferior, should have been fulfilling her own duty to her husband, and should meet her so lovingly without a word of reproach for the past.

Lucy looked pained by the question.

"I cannot tell," she said, "he varies so; if he were to see you to-night it might increase his delirium, but I think we can manage to let you look at him."

"But I may stay with him to-night, Lucy?"

"You are not fit for it, dearest, but we will ask Jacob," said her cousin, doubtfully; "he is master, you know," she added, with a smile. "And now, whether you are hungry or not, I must insist on your eating something."

Jacob came in while she was speaking; he had heard from Parkins of Hester's hurried return

to England, and of the fatigue she had that day encountered, and he felt that she must be thoroughly overwrought and unable to bear suspense.

He told her that Ralphie was none the worse for his journey, and would be soon asleep again; and then he asked her to follow him.

She trembled so as she rose, that he drew her hand within his arm and led her upstairs.

She seemed not to see anything until Lucy gently touched her, and pointed through an opening in the curtains.

There lay indeed her husband; but oh, how sadly changed! pale to whiteness, his lips purple with fever, and the features drawn and pinched as if with suffering. His eyes were closed, but he was not sleeping, for he murmured confusedly, and as Hester bent eagerly, thirstingly forward, he distinctly pronounced her name.

It was well that Jacob Bonham had kept her hand within his, or she would have thrown her arms round her husband in that moment of agony; it seemed to her that he must be dying, but that her love could hold him back to earth.

The pressure of Jacob's hand and his warning

gesture called back her recollection, and after a few minutes she submitted quietly to be led away.

It was more difficult to yield when the doctor insisted on her lying down for a while ; but when she resisted and said she could not leave Fred again, he told her that, cruel as it seemed, he must oppose her even entering his room till she had slept soundly for at least two hours.

She would only, he said, make herself thoroughly unfit to nurse her husband at all if she persisted in watching now ; and if he should wake and see her agitated, and in her exhausted state she could not help being so, the consequence might be fatal.

At last she yielded, although she said it would be impossible to close her eyes ; but Jacob was right ; and when Lucy went to look at her a short time after, she was sleeping as soundly as little Ralphie.

When Hester opened her eyes, the sun was shining brightly into the strange room. She could not recall all that had happened ; but an

instant's thought brought it back, and with a sense of guilt and fear that she had slept so long, she rose and dressed herself hurriedly.

Before she had finished, Lucy tapped at the door, and presently came in with Ralphie by her side.

"I have brought your boy to welcome you," she said; "what a sweet fellow he is!"

The childish face was full of eager delight at seeing everything new and strange, and he began to tell his mother what wonders he had met with; but Hester kissed him gently, and then turned to Lucy.

"He is still unconscious," said her cousin. "I do not think, from what Jacob says, that he has opened his eyes since you saw him; he has been with him all night."

"How good you are!" said Hester, as she kissed her.

Jacob met her with a far more anxious expression than on the previous evening. He did not tell Hester, because it seemed needless to alarm her before the London doctor's authority confirmed his fears; but there had been symptoms during the night which made him dread that

his patient was sinking, and that there was little hope of recovery.

He did not refuse Hester when she told him that she could not leave her husband again, but let her take Lucy's place by his bedside.

In the bright morning light, in the joy that she should see him again, she, the usually despondent Hester, had hoped to find him less changed than on the previous evening; but as she stood now beside the bed, bending over him, the shock was almost worse than when she was more over-wrought. It was not possible to believe that this could be her Frederic; the husband from whom she had parted so short a while ago.

Is there any agony like that of watching by our nearest and dearest, when they are changed almost beyond recognition, and are insensible to our tenderest words and looks?

It may be said the agony is sharper when we have been denied the privilege; but then it is an imaginary sorrow; we regret we know not what; we fancy a hundred tokens of affection, acts of devotion we could never have shown, and to which the sufferer would have been senseless. We have not in that case stereotyped on the

mind, branded into the heart, the pale stricken face, the wasted limbs, the unmistakable signs in every feeble movement, every gasping breath, of all that our darling has undergone, is still bearing.

And yet who would barter these sharp pangs, this agonized remembrance, for any relief which compelled them to leave their post?

So Hester felt. Spite of all the anguish, she was happier than she had been before she knew of Fred's illness. He was all her own now, her darling; the fresh green memory of her early love seemed to cool the arid remembrance of those three years, when love had been a desert, with no one resting-place for weary thought to look upon.

If she could but live over those years again—but she would not waste her thoughts in idle wishes, bitterly repentant as she felt.

On her knees beside him, and pressing the wasted hand, which seemed powerless in hers, to her lips, she solemnly vowed, if life were spared him, to keep her marriage promises—for had she not sorely broken them? Till she saw him lying there, when all that had gone before, each link

firmly riveted, passed before her in one brief moment, she had not realized this ; it had seemed to her that it would be a merit to make her husband's life happy, not a sacred duty which she had taken an oath to fulfil.

Yes, she would be a good wife now, a better mother to little Ralphie ; and it must be so ; God was too good, too merciful, to take her Fred from her, when she had at last learned his value.

But God was merciful to the good. How dared *she* hope for mercy ? No—oh, no ! She could hardly restrain the shuddering sobs that shook through each limb.

But there were steps approaching, and Lucy came and gently whispered they must go away for a little, while the doctors came in together.

It seemed hard to lose sight of him even for an instant, but she yielded.

She told Lucy she must see the doctor afterwards, and her cousin went into the hall to watch for his coming downstairs, while Hester sate, her face covered with her hands, for there was a stillness in Jacob's face as she passed that awed her. Could it be that her husband was really worse ? was there no hope ?

It seemed a weary waiting. At length, to her surprise, she heard a carriage drive away, and Lucy came into the room.

She looked sadly, oh, so sadly, in her cousin's face, but for a moment she did not speak.

Then she went up to Hester, and kissed her reverently and tenderly.

"Jacob will tell you, dearest; Dr. —— wished not to see you."

She knew what they meant her to understand, but she could not receive it.

She kissed Lucy, and then rising, went silently upstairs to take her place again beside her husband.

Jacob was waiting for her on the landing.

"Hester," he said, it was the first time he had called her so, "shall I tell you what Dr. —— fears, or has Lucy done so?"

"There is no hope, then?" she spoke in a strange, abrupt voice.

"He may linger some hours yet," he said, speaking very gently, "but I fear we must not hope for more."

Except that she grew paler, she seemed untouched.

"Will he ever know me again?" in the same harsh voice.

"I think so; I hope so. Stay," he said, as she was passing into the room, "consciousness seems to me to be even now returning. I am here within call, but I will not come unless you wish it. You can give him this as he revives," he put a phial in her hand; "the quantity is marked."

The permission to be alone with her husband in the first moments of his awakening, struck her with a death chill; it did not matter then, his doom was sealed. Slowly, almost fearfully, she stole round to the bedside.

There was no apparent change, except that the position was a little altered, and the breathing less difficult.

She fixed her eyes on his face, and presently—how long after she could not have told—the eye-lashes quivered, and the breath was drawn more deeply. Slowly his eyes opened, not rayless and unconscious, as Lucy had described them, but with a painful, strained look of thought, that, as they gradually settled on Hester's face, concentrated into fixed wonder.

Trembling with the excess of her joy, fearing almost to breathe, lest the sound should frighten the wakening spirit, she poured out the cordial with an unsteady hand, and, gently raising his head, put the glass to his lips.

It seemed to revive him greatly; he feebly raised his hand, and passed it before his eyes, as if striving to waken from some painful dream.

Before, she had felt that, but for fear of wakening him, she must have thrown her arms round him, and pressed her lips to his; now she dared not, she was too guilty.

His lips moved, and she bent eagerly forward.

"My Hester," he murmured; "my own now."

"No, no," she sobbed, throwing herself beside him, "not worthy to be called yours. Oh, Fred, Fred! you cannot love, you cannot forgive even, such a guilty creature as I am. I am not fit to be your wife. I showed no mercy, and I deserve none."

He raised his hand, and laid it on her head.

"Bless you, my darling! kiss me. I need forgiveness too."

She laid her cheek on his, wound her arms round him, and so they lay still, happier in that mute, feeble embrace, than they had ever been before

Again she whispered an earnest prayer for his forgiveness.

"Hush, my darling," he said, fondly, "that is all over now."

"Yes, you can—you do forgive," she sobbed, convulsively; "but God will not—my hardness, my pride—and you so good, and loving, and noble."

He stroked her cheek fondly, as she lay sobbing beside him.

"There is no love like God's, my Hester, only trust Him."

His breathing grew more painful, he whispered,

"Ralphie."

She rose gently, and gave him once more the reviving draught, and then going to the door, asked Jacob to fetch Ralphie.

He brought him in his arms, and Hallam stretched out his hand to Bonham.

"It will soon be over," he said, "you will be good to her and to him. God bless you. I

know you now; I knew your wife. Where is she?"

Jacob went to call her, and Hester held Ralphie to kiss his father. The child looked awe-struck, but he kissed the wasted cheek, and stroked it with his tiny hand.

"God bless you, darling!" and then he turned away his face.

Lucy came in, and pressed his hand; and then they left the husband and wife,—now at last one—together.

"You will not murmur, dearest," he whispered, when her face was again close to his. "It is His will to take me, and it has been joy—my Hester—to have seen you once more. I know that I am dying; I heard the doctor say so, and it is best."

She could only weep, hot blinding tears, she could not keep them back now; she was not vehement, or rebellious, but it seemed as if it could not be that he was leaving her.

The hours passed on, and still he lingered. . . .

The sun shone in more and more brightly through the shaded windows, filling the room with warm light. It fell on the pale face, defining still more sharply the wasted features.

How happy, how calm he looked—like the sunshine that filled the air. No! he could not be taken from her now.

Just then the church clock struck four. In the stillness of the room, it seemed to Hester that its solemn vibration was too awful to bear.

The sound roused her husband from the insensibility that was stealing over him.

He opened his eyes and looked at her; oh, how tenderly! The hot tears came again, blinding her; but he did not weep. He looked happy still. Even her agony did not disturb the calm that was surely more than earthly.

“My Hester,” he said, softly, “my own one—we have both loved and suffered—we have both sinned; but I far most, and first. That is over, darling,—it is such mercy to have seen you once——”

He paused, exhausted.

Strive as she would, she could not speak or check her tears—she could only kiss him, and gently press her cheek against his.

He whispered presently that Lucy should read the prayers for the dying, and Hester rang the little bell Jacob had placed beside her.

Lucy came, and as Hester listened, she grew calmer, more resigned

The day was dying now, the sunlight had faded, except a few lingering gleams: and still he lingered.

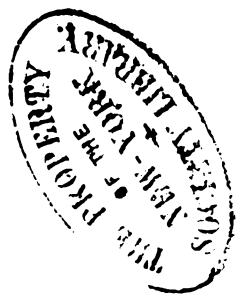
Suddenly a bright smile crossed his face,—

“You will come to me, darling—and Ralphie with you.”

She tried to answer, but she could not—sinking on her knees she hid her face beside him.

She thought she heard him say, “Thank God,” and there was a deep shivering sigh, then silence. —A little while afterwards she knew that he was taken to his Rest.

THE END.



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